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THE GOLDEN HAND; or, DANDY ROCK TO THE RESCUE.

BY GEORGE WALDO BROWNE,

AUTHOR OF "DANDY ROCK," "DREAD RIDER," "TIGER OF TAOS," "MAD MINER," ETC., ETC.



BIG SANDY WAS IN THE ACT OF WRENCHING HIS HAT FROM ITS POSITION, WHEN ANOTHER KNIFE SPED BY HIS HEAD.

The Golden Hand;

OR,
DANDY ROCK TO THE RESCUE.

BY GEORGE WALDO BROWNE,
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CHAPTER I. THE LOST MINE.

HAD a dial been placed on the mountain crest it would have indicated the hour of four P. M., August 20th, 1852.

It was a wild, picturesque scenery, such as only Arizona can show.

Amid one of her most diversified regions of mingled hills and valleys, plains and gorges, two persons paused in rapt wonder.

One was in the prime of life, his strong frame and hardy constitution giving promise of many years of active work. Long exposure to the sun had bronzed his skin, and continual hardship had somewhat shrunken his form, but the luster of his eye was undimmed, and the jetty hue of his raven hair was unfaded. Worn at full length the latter fell far down his back, while the pointed ends of an enormous mustache touched upon either shoulder.

'Twas Rock Randel—Dandy Rock, The-Man-from-Texas.

His companion was five-and-twenty years of age, a young man of fine physique, clear skin, regular features, genial disposition, and a general favorite of the mining settlement further down the valley.

He was an Eastern boy, who had sought the perils and privations of a miner's life that he might gain a share of the golden treasure.

Dustin Dare was what his parents had christened him, but the honest miners had ignored the fact and given him a cognomen to suit their whim; so he was generally called Silver Dust.

"And so that is the Lost Mine I have heard so much of, Rock?" said Dare, as from their slight eminence they gazed up the valley.

"Yes, Silver Dust; what you see is a part o' the Lost Mine. But you can't see the worst-looking portion o' it from hyar. Up on the mountain you can see the hull place, and a more dismal spot was never sot afore yer eyes!"

"It does look dreary from here. But, is there no way to reach the mine?"

"Nary a chance where any sane man would care to risk his life. You see it is surrounded by a nearly perpendicular ledge, except at the lower end, and there the smooth rocks pile so no one could get a foothold to climb 'em. There was a pass to the valley until old Scar-Face and his horde stopped it in their fight to get the lead."

"Were all killed in that fight?"

"Every soul, good and bad. It war an awful time."

"Has any one ever tried to reach the place since?"

"Lord bless you, no!"

"Why not? You say the lead is a rich one."

"Tis. There is gold enough in that place to make every man in the Gila valley rich as all the Jews in kingdom come!"

"And because report has given it the name of being haunted, no one has dared to go near it?"

"You have chipped it the first time, Dust. The claim is worked by spook miners, and I reckon thar ain't one in Mad River valley es would care to enter the Black Pocket, as thet place war called, even if they could."

"Oh, nonsense, Rock; we have but one life to live in this world, and if the miners of the Pocket were all killed they certainly will not trouble others."

"Don't know 'bout that," replied the Texan, with a dubious shake of the head. "We know all war rubbed out who war in the Pocket; we know it is impossible for any one to get thar, now the pass is stopped, and yet I have stood with others upon the mountain-side and looked down there to see men rushing round, while others seemed to be at work with their picks and shovels. I know they were all spooks!"

"Let's go up a little further where we can get a better view, and then I wish to hear the story of the Lost Mine. I am interested in it."

A few minutes later the twain paused where a full scene of the valley was obtained.

A strange-looking place was Black Pocket, the site of the Lost Mine; and not only strange, but drear and gloomy.

Surrounded on three sides by precipitous mountains which rose to considerable height, the only entrance to the place was through a ravine that, commencing with the width of half a mile, gradually narrowed to a pass of twenty feet. This last was then filled with a huge boulder of many tons weight, which had evidently been toppled from the cliff above by some giant power.

As Dustin Dare gazed upon the inaccessible spot he saw that it seemed wholly devoid of life of any form.

True, a stunted forest surrounded it, but every tree and shrub was desolate of foliage, though it was in midsummer.

Even the earth was black and its barren surface seemed as dead as the vegetation that once covered it.

"It doesn't look very inviting, that is a fact," admitted Dustin.

"I reckon so," assented Rock. "But one year ago it looked as green and lifish as the valley below."

"Come, I am impatient to know its story."

"A year ago last June, six brothers by the name of Redmond came up hyar, and I think were the first to diskliver the Pocket. Ennyway they were determined to pan its gold, and leaving a couple to watch their claim, the others went back arter their wimmen folks and implemments to work with, for they were going in business in 'arnest."

"They were sharp 'coons, every one o' 'em. There was Leon, the oldest and leader, and Roy, Dimon, Hart, Lewis and Hark. All six-footers, and dead-shots with the rifle, or sling-ups with the bowie."

"Scarcely had Dimon and Hart been left to guard the Pocket when they found two other men in the ravine."

"These other two claimed that they had the best right to the lead. Howsumever, the four agreed to wait till their leaders came, for these strangers said they had five friends coming back to the valley, the same as the Redmond brothers."

"Wal, the same day Leon Redmond guided his teams up the west side o' the Mad river, Russel Greenwood led his party up the east."

"They met at the pass, and you may believe they all looked surprised."

"At first Greenwood said they must fight for it, and as his followers were all big fellows with true grit, and he had one the most in number, it looked like lively times for the Redmonds."

"Leon warn't no sneak, but he told them it was for their interest to be friends, and thet there was gold enough for all."

"Finally they all agreed, except one of Greenwood's men, to cast up a dollar-piece and see if they should be friends or foes."

"It seemed a queer way to settle it, but good luck won, and so the two parties united and went into the Pocket together."

"Howsumever, es I sed, thar was one called Cape Horn—I think his name was Gasper Horn—who wouldn't agree to it; and swearing like a pirate he tore off down the valley like mad, saying he war fer whole painter or none."

"The twelve with their families and teams built themselves some cabins and went to work the very next day."

"The ore panned out big, fer they had struck it rich, and everything went well."

"The Apash were on the war-path ravin' es they ar' now, but Leon Redmond had done the old chief, Long Wind, a good turn, and he told the whites to go ahead and he would see they were left in peace. More than that he sent some o' his warriors to guard the pass for the miners while they dug, for 'twas no knowin' who might come along; and you see that was a regular trap to get one into."

"All went on slick for a time, till all to once that infernal Cape Horn came up with a lot of followers, and tried to drive out the Redmond boys and their companions."

"Old Long Wind pitched in, and Gasper Horn found he had got more than he bargained for."

"Finding he couldn't get possession o' the claim he swore no one else should hev it."

"One dark night he s'prised the Indian watchers at the pass and rubbed 'em out. Then he drilled into the ledge above, and charging it with powder blew the whole top of the cliff into the pathway, making it impossible for any one to leave the Pocket."

"At the same time a part of his followers got upon the windward side and fired the forest."

"The flames and stifling smoke swept down into the gorge so the miners could not extinguish it, and, unable to escape, every man and woman perished."

"I tell you it must have been awful, but

Horn and his horde had to pay dearly for their work. Before they could get away Long Wind led the savages upon them, and the red-skins carried off every one o' their skulps!

"You see nothing has grown on that fertile land since the fire, and no mortal foot has stepped inside the Pocket; spirit miners are working the Lost Mine, and—"

"Hist, Rock! Look there!"

CHAPTER II.

THE GOLDEN HAND AND THE LEAGUE IN BLACK.

As Silver Dust gave his sudden exclamation he pointed into the valley below.

Rock turned in the direction indicated, and started back as much surprised as his companion.

A party of horsemen had appeared in the ravine and drawn rein opposite them.

It was not their being there that startled the two miners so, but it was the riders' garb and mount that caused the twain to look upon them with wonder.

There were twelve of them, all men of powerful build, dressed, every one, in a suit of dead black, unrelieved by a single bright object from their slouch hats to heavy boots. Even their faces were covered with somber masks. The horses they rode, their trappings and weapons, were of the same raven hue.

"Jeems Stopple!" gasped Rock, "ef thet don't beat me holler es a drum! Do spooks ever kem in black?"

"Hark, Rock! what do they see?"

The little cavalcade were watching intently the growth above.

Then, as the leader pointed to the shrubbery ahead, the listeners heard him say plainly, in a deep, sepulchral voice, that seemed to thrill them through and through:

"Back! I hear some one coming!"

The group drew nearer together and watched and waited.

As they sat so motionless in their saddles, our adventurers saw that for their lives they couldn't tell one from another, they were so exactly alike.

After a moment the hoof-strokes of a horse were heard approaching.

"Be ready for work!" hissed the foremost of the black riders, and in an instant a dozen dark rifles were half-raised.

Then the bushes parted and a horseman dashed into the clearing.

As he caught sight of the cavalcade he halted abruptly, casting a swift glance about him.

The somber band quickly brought their weapons on a level with his breast as the newcomer paused.

"Who are you who dares to invade our domain?" cried the leader, in that awe-inspiring tone.

Offering no answer the lone rider looked from one to another in silence.

His appearance contrasted strangely with the others, and it was nearly as mysterious.

He seemed a man of middle life, strongly-built, with a handsome face nearly covered with a long, flowing beard. His garb was spangled with gold, and his rifle, revolvers and knife were all mounted with the same precious ore, while one side of the rim to his broad sombrero was fastened up by a golden hand. Ay, even the mustang he rode was of that peculiar color which made it look in the distance as if burnished with the yellow treasure.

"Tis the Golden Hand!" ejaculated Rock, in amazement.

"I ask again, why you are invading our domains?" exclaimed the leader in black.

"How long since such beings as you have claimed this land as *yours*?" was the other's reply.

"Answer my question at once, or we will make you food for the vultures!"

"I opine they would hardly care to touch such a black throng!" was the contemptuous response.

"Why don't you answer me?" and the man shook with anger at the other's audacity.

"Pardon me, but those rifles ill-become spooks. Put them down!"

"Tell me who you are, or we will riddle you with bullets!"

The Golden Hand laughed mockingly, and partially raised his glistening weapon, when the other cried:

"Hold! Make a move and you are a dead man!"

"Why don't you fire?" asked the daring rider, as he slowly lifted his rifle and brought it to his shoulder.

The men in black seemed spellbound. The

other seemed to hold them powerless by his cool, singular manner.

At length he said:

"Once more I ask who you are?"

No answer.

"Shall I waste a gold bullet upon you?" and his eyes flashed like balls of fire.

"We have no secret," exclaimed the spokesman, doggedly. "We are the 'League in Black!'"

"From whence comes the League in Black, and for what purpose are they on forbidden ground?"

"We are the spirits of the dead twelve whose bodies bleach in Black Pocket! We have come—"

A sharp cry from the Golden Hand, who had suddenly lowered his rifle, caused the speaker to pause.

"I recognize your voice. Are you Leon Redmond?"

"We don't go by names now. We are numbered. I am No. 1."

"Which is as much as to say that you are the leader, and the leader of the old twelve was Leon Redmond. Who are you? Do spirits generally appear in your form and garb? and do they always wear masks on their faces?"

"Friends alive!" yelled the other. "Is there no end to your impudence?"

"Bah! My purpose is to warn you out of the valley. No man, living, can stay an hour in the Lost Mine."

With the words he seemed about to depart, but the masked man stopped him by saying:

"Wait a moment. Are you the Golden Hand?"

"I am."

"What is your business here?"

"To watch over the Black Pocket."

"What interest have you there?"

"All of my relatives are there."

"Then you are a relative of the dead?"

"No."

"Then who and what are you?"

"Your enemy! So, see that your weapons are primed. I am going to kill every man of you! Now, I give you your choice to agree to meet me in a duel, one by one, or leave this valley within two minutes."

"You are a fool or a madman! Stand aside, or we will fill you with lead!"

Without making any reply the Golden Hand sat motionless in his saddle, while the League in Black gazed upon him in wonder.

"Jeems Cricket!" muttered Rock. "Ef 'em ain't queer doin's may I be blowed for a rattler. Dust, I am afeard we are gone beavers!"

"Why?" in surprise.

"S'pose 'em spooks git their peepers on us, we are gone to our funerals!"

"What is that Golden Hand?"

"Why, bless you, he is a spook es has been tearin' round loose for a big spell! Unless 'em chaps in mourning have got silver bullets they can't touch him! He slings gold and—"

"Hist! they are going to fight!"

"Jeems Stopple! won't they make things lively!"

"Time's up," declared the Golden Hand, tersely.

"Which means—"

"That you have defied me. Are you ready to face me, No. 1?"

"I am."

"All right. As fast as you fall, I will take you in your regular order."

"Don't he mean bizness!" ejaculated Dandy Rock.

"Shall I select one of my friends to give the signal?" asked the masked leader.

"No. That would be hardly fair, for I have but little confidence in them."

"What is your wish, then?"

"I call upon those men watching us from the mountain-side to act as our seconds, and see that everything is fair."

"Good Lord!" gasped The-Man-from-Texas; "do they mean us? Let's git like blazes!"

CHAPTER III.

STRANGE DUELING.

"ROCK DANDEL," called out the sharp voice of the Golden Hand, "be so kind as to come here with your companion."

"Jeems Stopple! he is arter us!"

"Hadn't we better consent? I think we shall fare as badly if we refuse," said Dare.

"You can do jess as you are a mind to. This 'oon don't go nary step!"

The League in Black had looked up in surprise.

"That Texan here!" exclaimed the leader, under his breath. "I thought he was dead."

The Golden Hand grew impatient.

"Will you come, Rock Handel? I promise you shall not be molested."

"I don't savor of spooks!" answered Rock, uneasily. "Can't you 'scuse me, old pard? I feel awful dizzy at my stummick!"

"But you will come, Dustin Dare? The man who favors me now shall have my lasting friendship."

"I am going, Rock," the young man said to his companion.

"I wouldn't! It will be your funeral!"

"Bosh! here is to your good luck till I come back," and with a wave of the hand Silver Dust hurried into the valley.

"Let me get one more peep at him," said the Texan to himself. "It'll be last o' the poor boy!"

"I am glad you have come," greeted the Golden Hand. "You have heard all that has been said, and know what I want. When we are ready, count off the signal."

All this was spoken in a matter-of-fact way, and turning to the masked leader he went on:

"No. 1, I challenge you first. I shall follow in your regular order. See, you stand by yonder pine. I will ride back to that oak. You can dismount or not, as you choose. I shall not take the trouble."

Silently the chief of the league took his position, without dismounting, and the duelists were ready.

At the signal they fired simultaneously—at least they pulled the trigger at the same instant; but, while the report of the masked man's weapon rung out loud and clear, the Golden Hand's rifle only snapped!

Still, he was untouched by the other's bullet. Muttering something under his breath, he said aloud:

"I will look after you, No. 1, when I have dispatched your comrades. No. 2, I challenge you next!"

"And here is your man, old rusty lock!" cried one of the others, as he rode to the spot deserted by his chief.

This time Golden Hand looked carefully at his piece and placed the cap upon the nipple with care.

"Already."

Again Silver Dust counted off in clarion tones the ominous numbers.

"Three! Fire!"

Like a flash the combatants raised their rifles, and glanced swiftly along their barrels.

As before, that of the masked leaguer belched forth its fiery contents, while the weapon of the Golden Hand only exploded its cap! And yet he was unscathed!

"Strange!" he ejaculated, and a frown gathered upon his countenance. "But I am not done! No. 3, take your place."

He spoke authoritatively now.

Still more carefully than before he examined his firearm, and recapped it.

This time his antagonist seemed more loth to come forward.

"He ain't no mortal!" declared No. 3; "and I don't care about facing that shooter of his."

"Bah! you are a coward," cried No. 1.

"I tell you, cap'n, he—"

"Fire and furies! is that the way you are to address me?" thundered the leader.

"Good-by all," said the thoroughly frightened man, as he rode forward to the pine. "His shooter ain't going to fail this time and I am a dead—"

"Hist! another word and I will send you to perdition!" exclaimed No. 1.

Mechanically taking his position, the cowering No. 3 was ready.

For the third time Silver Dust counted off the fatal numbers and gave the signal; and for the third time, too, the affair ended as a farce.

The Golden Hand, as if he had a charmed existence, was unhurt by the masked man's shot; but his own weapon missed as it had twice before!

"Bah!" cried No. 1; "would you try again? This is boy's play!"

"Worse than that," declared the other, frankly. "There is a spell upon my rifle. I will give you one more chance to leave the valley and if you don't accept, I shall retire from the contest now, but the worst will be your own in the end!"

"Out upon you for a fool!" yelled the leader of the League in Black. "It is for us to dictate terms and not such as you!"

The rider of the mustang winced slightly, and partially turned his animal to ride away, when No. 1 thundered:

"Surround him, lads! Don't let the knave escape!"

In an instant the League in Black dashed forward. But the Golden Hand disappeared in the growth, almost at a bound.

"Hunt him down!" cried the leader. "There he goes! Fire, quick!"

The band sent a volley after the fugitive, which was answered by a mocking laugh.

Dustin Dare saw the last of them vanish among the trees and boulders, to find himself alone.

"Guess I had better escape while I have the opportunity," he said to himself, and hurried away to find his companion.

Reaching the spot where he had left Rock, he was amazed to find him missing.

He dared not shout his name for fear he might be heard by the men in the valley, whom he hardly cared to trust.

"It can't be he has deserted me. No; he must be near by," and he fruitlessly searched for the Texan.

"I fear something has happened to him. But I can do no better than to start for camp," and he started down the hillside, at a rapid pace.

Just as he reached the valley, he was suddenly confronted by a horseman.

Springing back he tried to evade the rider, but, to his dismay, found himself encircled by the League in Black!

"Hold on!" cried No. 1. "Another step and you shall smell brimstone!"

Finding he was surrounded Silver Dust leaned against a pine near by, and coolly presenting his rifle, said tersely:

"What is wanted?"

Only a moment had passed, and as the dozen horsemen crowded into the little clearing their leader replied:

"We want to know what has called you into Black Pocket valley?"

"If that is all, you may as well let me go. I only came here out of curiosity. I belong to Mad River settlement."

"Spoken like a man. Now we would ask you who that strange being called the Golden Hand is?"

"I know nothing of him."

"Hold! He knows you and we believe you know something of him."

"Never saw him before in my life, as sure as I live."

"You have heard of him?"

"Yes, as the Specter Rider of the Lost Mine."

"Strange he should know you and you know nothing of him."

"I cannot explain it myself, but it is the truth."

"Where is your companion, The-Man-from-Texas?"

"I don't know."

"Beware!" cried the chief as he fixed his piercing eyes upon the other. "A lie shall seal your doom! tell us where Rock Handel has gone or we will tear you limb from limb!"

CHAPTER IV.

A RED SURROUND.

"I DON'T KNOW," reiterated Silver Dust firmly. "When I got back where I had left him he was gone, and I am myself sorely puzzled as to his whereabouts."

The speaker was so honest in his words that the league accepted them in good faith.

"Probably he has gone to Mad River City," said the chief.

"Perhaps, though I cannot say."

"Never mind; we shall find him in good time."

"Then I am at liberty to go n.y way?"

"Yes; upon one condition."

"What is that?" asked Dare in surprise.

"That you never come into this valley again."

The young miner looked up in amazement. "Is that my only alternative?" he asked.

"It is. Swear that you will never enter Black Pocket valley again, and you shall be allowed to depart in peace. Refuse and you die within five minutes."

"Pray tell me why you demand such an unreasonable surrender?"

"Dog! Enough for you to know that we are the owners of the Lost Mine, and that it is for your interest to leave without another word."

As we have said, Silver Dust was standing near a huge pine, which partially protected him from the masked band; but as he glanced around he saw no avenue of escape.

Even had he known Rock's fate he would not have easily been driven from the valley; as it was he was determined to put on a bold front and have it out.

"Speak!" cried the chief, as he hesitated.

"We are in a hurry to be away. See, the sun is setting. Which do you prefer—life or death?"

"Neither at your hands!" came the defiant reply.

At the same moment he raised his rifle with lightning-like rapidity, and glancing along its barrel pulled the trigger.

Only the sharp click of the hammer followed.

Then the League in Black with one accord rushed upon him.

Swinging the rifle around his head Dare bounded forward.

A volley of shot flew about him, but he reached the brush growth and dashed headlong through it.

The mounted leaguers could not well follow, and were obliged to diverge to one side.

"Don't let the dog escape!" yelled No. 1, as he spurred furiously down the ravine.

Silver Dust looked hastily to the priming of his firearms and placed a new cap on its tube, as he plunged along.

Then as the wild horde rode down the gully and passed him, to make a stand in front, he tried to discharge the piece again, but still it failed!

Disconcerted somewhat by this he bounded recklessly to the right.

"Stop him at yonder oak," ordered the masked leader. "Quick, for your lives!"

Dare reached the spot just as three of the black riders confronted him.

Before a blow could be struck, however, a hoarse cry came from the ravine above, and the Golden Hand rushed to the place.

As his yellow mustang came to a halt, he raised his rifle and the hammer clicked twice in quick succession.

The weapon had not seemed to explode the cap.

"Fire away, old Vengeance!" snorted No. 1.

"At him, lads, and the cur is ours."

Without a word Golden Hand snatched his knife from its sheath, and sweeping it in the air dashed upon the amazed throng.

As he reached the nearest he drove the fatal blade to its haft in the leaguer's breast!

"You ain't steel-proof if you are bullet!" cried the enraged rider.

Ere he could strike a second blow, however, the surprised band fell back, and beat a hasty retreat, followed by the Golden Hand.

Thus Silver Dust found himself quite unexpectedly free. Hurrying rapidly forward as the last sound of the horsemen died away, knowing it would be folly to follow even his strange deliverer, he soon came where the ravine widened into a considerable valley and away to the east and south stretched an extensive plain.

Dare had gone perhaps half a mile, when he suddenly paused.

"It can't be I am wrong," he said, half aloud; "but nothing seems familiar!"

Not willing to acknowledge to himself yet that he feared he was lost, he pushed on again.

"We crossed the brook twice. Once at a big pine, and then near some rapids. That race with those black riders has completely bewildered me; but I am certain I have crossed the stream but once. Hark! I ought to hear Mad river from here. My faith! I have turned too far to the left, and the settlement lies away to my right. Whew! this is a pretty go! But I must make the best of it."

Bearing to the west, he still continued his course; but as he hurried on and the forest grew denser, while he was leaving the mountains far behind, he finally paused again, this time in dismay.

He was lost!

It was then getting dark, and he knew he must look up a stopping-place for the night.

It was while thus gazing anxiously around that he discovered the glimmer of a fire near at hand.

Cautiously advancing, not knowing whether he should find friends or foes, he approached the place, and soon saw four men gathered around its ruddy blaze.

Their garb showed them to be miners, and they were rough-looking, heavily bearded.

Venturing at a hazard to address them, they all bounded to their feet in an instant, rifles in hand.

"I am only one, and peaceful at that," said Dare, as they glared upon him.

"Who might ye be?" asked the leader, a tall, muscular person, who seemed more of a mountaineer than miner.

"My name is Dustin Dare, better known perhaps as Silver Dust. While prospecting in the valley to-day I got lost."

"Sho! Ye don't mean to say ye are prospectin' in the Black Pocket valler all alone?"

"I had a companion, but we got separated, and I fear he has got into trouble."

"Wal, ye hev got some grit, ennyway. Ye look like an honest chap, so j'ine us. I am old Gil Rey, frum the Rocker Mountains, and hyar am my chums, True Bill and Big Paws and Shelby Jack," and with a wave of his long arm the mountaineer-miner sunk back upon his seat.

Silver Dust saw that three of the men were past middle life, while the fourth, Shelby Jack, was about his own age.

Just outside the camp-ground he saw four pack-mules, and a pile of picks, shovels, and other mining utensils, together with sundry pots, pans, etc.

"I reckon we are in for it," said the first speaker, with a grin. "We are on the trail fer Black Pocket! Are ye enny 'quainted up there?"

"Never was there before to-day."

"Sho! Wal, fix the chap sumthin' to fill his crop, Big Paws, while he tells what he knows. Hev ye seen the Golden Hand?"

"Yes; he saved my life this afternoon."

"Sho! Then he ain't so bad es they hev told? But gin us yer yarn."

Commencing with his leave of Mad River "City" that afternoon, to explore the valley, he told what the reader already knows.

"What did ye say yer pard's name was?" asked True Bill, suddenly interrupting Dare in the midst of his narrative.

"Rock Randel, though he is generally called The-Man-from-Texas."

"Rock Randel!" cried the other, excitedly.

"D'ye mean to say my old chum o' twenty years is in this kentry?"

"That was my friend's name. He came from Texas to this place, I think."

"So hev I, and Gil and Jack hyar! Can it be Rock is livin' when I s'posed he was gone under long ago? He was tall, with long black hair and mustache. A regular whirlwind on the war-path!"

"The-Man-from-Texas must be your man."

"Ken it be?" and the excited miner danced to and fro. "Boys!" he cried, "I won't know no rest till Rock is safe. We must strike his trail in the mornin' fer all the Pocket! Ef it should be the old boy I hunted with—"

A wild cry in the ravine above caused every man to leap up.

Then fierce shouts followed, and the report of firearms.

A moment later a woman riding a bridleless mustang dashed into the opening, crying:

"Save me! I am pursued by a hundred savages!"

As she spoke, the woods rung with the war-whoop of the fierce Apaches.

CHAPTER V.

THE LEAGUE IN BLACK AGAIN.

"QUICK! for cover, boys!" cried old Gil Rey. As the five men sprung back into the shade of the forest, and half-dragged the fugitive with them, the yelling red-skins surrounded the place.

"Howgh—ough!" shrieked the leader, and his followers echoed the cry till it became deafening.

Then the sharp crack of the miners' firearms rung out and the war-whoop of the foremost savages became their death-cry.

"Don't giv' 'em enny show!" cried True Bill.

A volley of bullets and arrows from the Apaches came tearing through the growth.

In a moment the fight was hand-to-hand.

Clubbing their rifles they hardly waited to stand on the defensive, but met their wild foes in the edge of the timber.

By the movement they gained an advantage, which they had not been slow to discover.

While the savages were plainly seen in the opening, they were partially hidden by the darkness of the woods.

Thus for a brief interval they held them at bay.

But overwhelming numbers began to tell.

Gil Rey shivered the stock of his rifle over the head of the first savage, and throwing the now useless weapon aside, drew his long knife and closed in a life and death grapple with the next Apache that came within reach.

Big Paws, one of the most skillful knife-men in the mountains, had relied on his keen-edged weapon from the first. Already the second enemy had fallen before it, and the third was doomed.

True Bill and Shelby Jack were no less active. But both, side by side, were being pressed into quarters from whence they must retreat or die.

"Help! save me!" cried the female whom they were trying to protect.

Silver Dust was nearest. In fact it was his strong arm which had borne her from the mus-

tang, and was fighting nobly to save her from further harm.

He saw her peril. She had been swept from him by a body of the red demons, and as they dragged her into the clearing, at least half-a-dozen crowded around and with uplifted tomahawks were in the act of dealing their deadly blows.

With a defiant yell, he sprang to the spot, and reached the captive.

At the moment high above the din of the strife rung the voice of True Bill, crying:

"Break, boys, or you'll go under!"

"Cache, every coon of you!" supplemented Gil Rey, as he overpowered his assailant, but saw the madness of continuing the fight.

The next moment he cleared his way for the growth, and gained the side of Bill.

Shelby Jack was no less successful.

"Where am I others?" cried the old mountaineer, hurriedly.

"Gone under meb—"

"Howgh—owgh—ow—gh!" and the demoniac horde again pressed upon them.

"My God! Silver Dust and Big Paws are a-goner!" cried Gil Rey, as with his companions he was forced to retreat.

Away into the forest they were driven like hunted beasts, leaving everything behind.

Dare, reaching the captive's side, fought like a hero to keep the red horde back. Big Paws saw his endeavors and unmindful of his own safety bounded to the rescue.

For a moment the gallant twain made fierce work for the yelling Apaches.

Only for an instant, however. For every savage that fell a dozen rushed in, and inch by inch the brave men were pressed back, until escape was impossible.

While trying to defend his charge from a furious blow Dare fell.

Big Paws was overpowered and the red-men had conquered.

Wild with glee they danced around their prisoners.

When the excitement of their victory had somewhat passed, they bound them securely.

This done they prepared for an instant departure.

"Me take pale-face to great chief's wigwam, then me see fun!" announced the leader, with a grim smile.

The savages took the miners' animals with them, but left the mining utensils behind, probably not considering them worth the trouble of carrying off.

Silver Dust soon recovered his senses, and it was light enough for him to see that the red-skins numbered full a score, to say nothing of those who had gone in pursuit of the other miners, or those who had staid behind to look after the dead.

With his companions he had been placed on the back of one of the pack-mules, and was securely bound, while a guard walked on either side, making escape impossible.

He could see by the moonlight that the woman was young. In fact, she was a girl of not more than nineteen summers, and extremely beautiful.

He felt his heart go out to her as he witnessed her suffering from the cruel treatment of their captors, and his own agony was doubly hard to bear.

Big Paws bore his captivity with stolid indifference. He knew enough of Indian nature to put on a careless appearance, no matter what the reverse might be.

A mile had been slowly passed over and they were coming upon a country less hilly and broken, when the savages halted.

Wondering what had occasioned the pause, the prisoners glanced around to see approaching a band of horsemen.

Silver Dust started as he recognized the League in Black.

The Apaches seemed terrified and huddled close together.

When within a few rods the party paused, and after a moment's silence the leader said:

"How is it, warriors of Long Wind, that you again dare to enter the land of the League in Black?"

"White captive run away; Long Wind send braves to get her," answered the chief in broken English.

"Captive? Let me see," and he rode nearer.

"Ha! you lied, chief! You spoke of but one, when you have three."

"Ugh! chasing white gal, we find pale-face, one, two, three, four, five. Some run—we get rest."

"Well done, if true. Oho, Mr. Silver Dust! It seems you are in the net at last. That is

good. Look to it, chief, that he don't escape. I guess I will take the girl off your hands."

"Chief no let squaw go!" exclaimed the leader, quickly. "Long Wind be hoppin' mad!"

"I can't help that. Just unfasten her from that animal and I will take charge of her. Young lady, come with me and you have nothing to fear."

"Oh, sir, save me, and you shall be liberally rewarded."

As the strange person seemed bent on carrying out his purpose the Indians began to show hostile intentions, though they looked upon the mysterious gang in awe.

"Put down your weapons!" commanded No. 1. Turning to his followers, he said: "Lads, present arms."

As the twelve ominous muzzles stared them in the face, the red-skins cowed in terror.

Whipping out a huge knife, the masked man cut the ligatures that held the captive to the saddle.

This was too much for the chief, and with a fierce yell he bounded upon his foe.

As he moved, a whip-like crack was heard, and he fell dead!

"The first warrior that moves dies, and none shall be spared!" thundered the stern leaguer.

Awed by the sound of his voice, and his awful appearance, the Indians allowed him to lift the maiden from the mule upon his own midnight steed.

"It is well," he said, as he turned to leave. "I leave the others to you. But beware how you enter our domain again. Remember the Black Riders of the Lost Mine spare none who cross their way."

Saying which he turned to ride away, when the girl cried:

"Will you not save my friends also?"

"No; they are in better hands! I ought not to have stopped to save you, but must take you to your friends as soon as possible," and with an appeal of hers ringing on the air, the League in Black soon disappeared.

After a short consultation the Apaches moved on toward their village, taking the body of their dead leader with them.

The whites could see that they were madly excited, and knew they must receive the vengeance of their disappointment. But could they have been certain the helpless maiden had fallen among friends, they would have felt easier.

Somehow, they could but realize that a dark future hung over them all.

CHAPTER VI.

THE STAKE—GOLDEN HAND.

In silence the Indians hurried on their way. Not far did they advance before coming into a piece of heavier growth than any before, and upon the further side where it reached to a valley of some extent they came upon their encampment.

The village was all astir, and it took but a glance for the prisoners to see that the savages numbered several hundred.

Straight to the center the captors led their victims.

Their appearance was hailed with wild yells, and soon the motley horde began to gather around, making the night hideous with their cries and gibberish.

Before the chief, Long Wind, the leader told his story, interrupted at intervals by fierce exclamations.

Silver Dust and Big Paws were brought before the old Apache, the act causing a new outbreak among the crowd.

What followed, the old mountain man assured his companion was a council-of-war.

One after another of the old, weather-beaten chiefs harangued the throng, and many of the younger ones addressed them with fierce gestures.

All of that was perfectly unintelligible to Dare, though Big Paws, who had witnessed such scenes before, and understood a part of their speech, whispered to him that it was going hard with them.

"Our trail is spotted, young beaver," he said to Dustin. "But they hev another captive somewhere, which I don't jess see into. Can't be they hev kaptered one of the boys?"

"Perhaps it's Rock!"

"Mebbe. But hark! That ar' smoky-skin is jess givin' it to us, hot and heavy. Our trap is sprung in spite o' ginger!"

A young chief was addressing the excited mob, and from the wild applause they paid to his words, it was seen that he was not speaking for naught.

When he had ended a battle-scarred veteran

spoke to Long Wind, and a few moments later the captives were dragged to the opening in front of the wigwams which were located in the form of a circle.

In a few minutes a stake was driven firmly into the ground in the center of the place, and the doomed men knew only too well what the red skins had decreed their fate should be.

"Bear up like a man, Silver Dust," said Big Paws, in an undertone, "and it will be all the better for us."

The busy savages soon heaped a pile of brushwood and small saplings with branches of larger trees all dry around the spot in a circle, and when it was done they renewed their yells, and rushed about in frantic excitement.

Then Big Paws was rudely borne forward, and the thongs removed from his ankles, he was made to stand upon his feet.

This was the signal for the beginning of the prisoner's ordeal.

In an instant all the old hags and children, to say nothing of the innumerable squaws, began to pelt him with stones and sticks, hooting and jeering at him in a most hideous manner.

All this the giant hunter received with apparent indifference.

Exasperated by their ineffectual attempts upon him, the horde turned to inflict a similar punishment upon Silver Dust.

Though a novice in the Indian method of warfare, Dare summoned all the fortitude of his nature to his aid, and stood the test grimly.

Failing in their efforts in that direction, the savages resorted to a harsher fate.

His clothing nearly torn from his lacerated body, Dustin Dare was bound firmly to the stake.

At this every throat in the mass of demons seemed to utter a wild, unearthly shriek, so fearful that the whites would fain have covered their ears had it been possible.

When the tumult had somewhat subsided a torch was applied to the combustible wood, and the tiny spark of fire soon fanned into a flame by the wind it swept along the encircling pile at a startling rate, while huge volumes of smoke nearly suffocated the helpless victim.

Big Paws groaned aloud as he beheld his companion's awful sufferings.

Higher and higher leaped the fiery furnace, while, shrieking out his agony, the doomed Silver Dust staggered back against the stake.

Let us return to the fortunes of True Bill and his companions.

Finding they could not be of any assistance to their friends, they sought safety for themselves in flight.

With a horde of the red-skins upon their heels they plunged through the forest. Choosing their course where the growth was thickest, and soon gaining the bottom of the valley, they succeeded at last in eluding their pursuers.

When satisfied their foes had given up the chase, they cautiously returned to the old camping-place.

"This is rough and tumble," declared Gil Rey. "I reckon the varmints hev toted off Paul and Silver Dust with thet gal."

"Jess so I opine. Shall we take the trail?" asked True Bill.

"That am this 'coon's vardict. What do ye say, Shelby Jack?"

"I move we follow the savages and rescue our friends if possible."

"Them is my sentiments. Lead the way, Gil."

"Let's cache our things es the reds hev so kindly left them. They may change their minds ye know and kem back fer 'em."

Acting upon the mountaineer's suggestion, the utensils were soon carefully hidden away, and the little party started on their perilous work.

The direction of the Indian encampment was well known, and thus they were able to push on without hesitation.

It was while thus hurrying on that they were admonished of danger by the sound of a horse approaching.

Drawing back into the shade they soon saw the rider of the yellow mustang come into sight. "It must be Golden Hand!" said Bill under his breath.

"Yes," answered Gil Rey. "Will it do for us to make ourselves known?"

Before the others could reply, however, the stranger paused and glancing quickly around finally fixed his eyes on their covert, saying:

"You need not fear me. I am friendly to the peaceful."

Finding they were discovered, though through what agency they could not tell, the three cautiously left their concealment.

"Dog my pony ef ye ain't a sharp 'un," declared Gil Rey.

"I saw you some time ago," said the horseman. "Are you the men who had the fight with the Apaches?"

"I reckon we are a part o' 'em. The rest o' us, two boys and a gal, hev been tukin captives we fear by the varmints."

"A girl did you say? Pray have you seen a lady riding a mustang near your camp?"

"That war jess the one we meant. She kem to us chased by a gang o' smoky-skins. We pitched in to help her and got kerwalloped most awfully!"

"And she has been captured?"

"Surees shootin' beaver by starlight!"

"And two of your friends have been taken with her?"

"Yes; Silver Dust and Paul Hayes, or Big Paws es we call him fer fun."

"Then we must rescue them. Do you know where the Indians are camping now?"

"I reckon. We was going there straight es a fall wind."

"I—"

The noise of a party of horsemen approaching caused him to stop.

In a moment the League in Black rode into view.

To their still greater surprise the watchers saw a woman's form on the horse with the leader.

"Tis she!" cried the Golden Hand, and spurring his mustang forward he dashed into the path of the amazed leaguers.

"Hold on!" thundered he, but unheeding his command the party kept slowly ahead.

"Stop or I will shoot you!" cried Golden Hand.

"Oh, save me! save me!" implored the maiden as she saw the speaker.

Still the strange cavalcade moved away, unnoticed by the cries.

Excited to frenzy the unknown raised his rifle to fire at the foremost, but the weapon hung fire!

Plunging his steed forward the baffled marksman dashed madly upon the nearest rider, and striking a furious blow with his knife, felled the masked man back upon the haunches of his horse.

Before Golden Hand could repeat the stroke, the whole cavalcade started into a gallop and quickly disappeared. The excited rider of the yellow mustang followed.

CHAPTER VII.

SHOTS FOR A LIFE.

"It's no use for us to follow," said Gil Rey. "But ef that ain't queer doin's I don't know a stump from a rattler!"

"Wal, it am sum!" chimed in Bill.

"Who in mercy's name is that Golden Hand?" exclaimed Shelby Jack.

"Dunno enny more'n I know who 'em 'tarnal coyotes in black are!" answered Gil.

"They claim to be the spirits of the murdered owners of the Lost Mine."

"Sho-o-o! Reckon I don't savor much o' sich creetur's!"

"This won't save our friends," cried True Bill, and, heeding the words, they once more hurried ahead.

It was not long before they came within hearing of the savages, as they carried on their wild carousal.

"Thar they are!" exclaimed True Bill.

"Now, boyees, kems the tug o' war."

Moving by stealth through the timber, they slowly approached the Indian village.

"They ar' up to sum o' their works or I'm a p'izen snake!" gritted Gil Rey.

Without answering, Bill kept straight ahead, while Shelby Jack followed close behind the mountain veteran.

At last they reached the edge of the growth, and were in full sight of the red-men's home.

"Look!" hissed Bill, as the glare of the fire lit the surroundings with startling brilliancy, "we are too late!"

"My teeth!" answered his companion, "they are burnin' 'em to the stake, or my name ain't Gilman Reynolds!"

"Yes; 'tis Silver Dust!" exclaimed Jack.

"See, there is Paul Hayes bound near at hand!"

"We must save 'em or go under!" exclaimed Bill, excitedly.

"How?" asked Shelby Jack. "I fear we cannot rescue Dare, or couldn't if we had a score to help us! See! he falls back against the stake! The poor fellow's sufferings are almost over!"

"Boyees!" said Gil Rey, impetuously. "I see but a single chance, and that is like one in a

thousand. We must shoot off his bonds, and if he has life enough left to outrun the varmints, perhaps we can cover his retreat so he can get away. I see no other way."

The flames swept higher in fiercer heat, and the savage spectators renewed their fiendish cries with redoubled zest.

"We can't make it any worse for him," replied True Bill, quickly. "Let's try your plan, Gil."

"All right. Is your hand steady, Bill?"

"As Chimbley Rock on Platte!"

"Good! How are you, Jack?"

"I won't fail."

"That's grit. D'y'e take the thong that goes round the stake. Hold firm, and plum the center. Bill, ye shoot off the cord from the left wrist, and I will take the right. When 'tis done, ye shout fer him to run like mad. Ef he can't do it, I will put a bullet through his heart and thus end his sufferings. 'Tis all we can do. Are ye ready?"

"Sure as time."

The light from the fire made it as bright as day, and from their position the miners had a good range of the fearful scene. As calmly as if practicing at target-shooting rather than risking all on shots for a human life, they raised their rifles.

"Now—ready—fire!"

The three reports blended as one.

A cloud of smoke curled up from the spot, and the red-men paused instantaneously in their mad proceedings.

Dustin Dare felt a sharp twinge of pain upon either wrist; but before he could realize more, a stentorian voice started him into activity.

"Run, Dust! For your life, run!"

Springing wildly forward, he found that he was free.

Then, before the amazed savages understood the sudden movement, he leaped the burning fagots and bounded past the red-skins at the top of his speed.

"Look hyar," cried Gil Rey to his companions, "d'y'e look to helping him escape, an' while the varmints are arter ye, I will help Big Paws out o' his s'rape."

Silver Dust was running for the growth a little distance below, and without hesitation Bill and Jack rushed to his assistance.

Not till the fugitive was nearly down to the growth did the surprised Indians recover their wits enough to give chase.

Then, with yells truly terrifying, they pursued *en masse*.

Some were scarcely less than a rod behind, and it seemed as if the captive could not escape.

He saw his peril, and tried to flee the faster.

Just as he reached the timber, Bill and Jack shot the foremost red-skins, and a moment later joined Dare.

"Quick, for the bottom!"

A wild and exciting scene followed.

Nearly all the Apaches mingled in the race, and the woods were filled with them.

Keeping close together, the whites were driven to their utmost.

"Load yer shooter, ef ye can, Jack; but don't fire till I tell ye," panted Bill, as they rushed through the undergrowth.

"They are coming from the right, and mean to head us off."

"Turn to the left, then. There is a river ahead somewhere, and we must reach it."

Then a volley from the Indians checked their speech.

They had scarcely gone three rods further when Shelby Jack, catching his foot, tripped and fell.

Not missing him for a moment, the others kept on.

Before John Racy could regain his feet the red-skins were so close upon him that he saw it was folly to run further.

He saw a thick clump of bushes ahead, and crawled rapidly to it; when reaching the spot he dashed into the tangled growth to be thrown headlong down a steep declivity.

Half-stunned he staggered upon his knees, but a fierce growl caused him to gaze wildly about, without moving more.

As he discovered a pair of fiery eyeballs watching him from the darkness beyond, his hand sought for his knife to find he had lost it!

His rifle had been jerked from his grasp by the fall, and he was unarmed!

Another fierce growl and he heard the angry beast lash his side in rage.

"Jack is a goner!" exclaimed True Bill, after he and Dare had gone a little way.

Glancing anxiously back they could see nothing of him.

"'Twon't do for us to stop!" and thus they were forced to keep on.

Still continuing to yell as fierce as ever the mad horde of Apaches kept up their pursuit.

Half a mile was passed in the wild chase and the miners were fast losing hope.

Though many of the savages had fallen behind, the majority were slowly gaining on the whites, owing in part to their better knowledge of the land.

"Keep on, Dust," said Bill. "Ef I stop ahint ye may be able to clear 'em. I ain't much longer to peg it, ennyway, and if the varmints git my skulp—"

"Not another word, True Williams," broke in Dare. "We escape or die to— Look! I see water ahead!"

They had indeed come in sight of a small pond.

It was not many acres in extent, but to turn around it would be to suffer capture.

Breaking through the line of shrubbery that skirted its shore, they dropped silently into the flood.

A war-whoop from the Indians told that they had missed them.

A moment later they reached the bank.

Pausing in wonder, they soon surrounded the place, and dancing around in demoniac glee, watched for the reappearance of the fugitives.

Quietly sinking beneath the surface they would keep under the tide as long as possible, and then gently rise to get their breath.

Five, ten minutes passed in that way and no relief was promised for the dreadful suspense.

Ay, at last to their horror the hunted miners heard the savages entering the water, and in a few moments the pond swarmed with the furious horde!

CHAPTER VIII.

TRUE BILL'S DEFIANCE.

As Gil Rey saw the main body of the Indians rush in pursuit of his companions, he prepared himself for the hazardous undertaking he had decided upon.

Quickly reloading his rifle he then cautiously but swiftly left the cover of the forest, and hurrying forward in a stooping posture he soon reached the shade of the wigwams.

Every able-bodied savage had gone in the chase, though the ground was flocked with old or decrepit warriors, shrieking squaws and children.

Darting along like a shadow the mountaineer soon gained the rear of the huts that fronted the fire.

Now for the struggle.

Closely watching the crowd of savages, who fortunately for his purpose, were several feet in advance of the captive, and all had turned their backs to him as they watched the exciting race, he dodged from place to place until only the clearing lay between him and Big Paws.

He tried to attract his friend's attention, but found he could not do it without disturbing the savages.

So, with his rifle in his left hand and knife clutched firmly in the other, he flitted noiselessly along.

The quick ear of Paul Hayes heard his cat-like step and he turned to behold him with joy. He was too much of a mountain-man, however, to betray his discovery to their foes.

In an instant Gil was by his side.

"Ky—yi—yah—ough!" yelled the excited Apaches, unconscious of the daring deed being done behind them.

A quick thrust of the knife and Big Hayes was free.

Springing lightly to his feet the twain started to escape.

Still the Indians rushing frantically to and fro were unconscious of losing their captive.

Gil Rey saw a corral of animals at the upper end of the village.

"Are our horses thar?" he asked, in a whisper.

Hayes nodded an affirmative.

"Let's take 'em!"

"Agreed."

Unmindful of the additional risks they were courting, the hardy miners hurried rapidly that way.

Almost at the same moment a new outbreak among the savages told that they were discovered.

"We must work for our lives!" cried Reynolds, and no longer attempting any caution, they bounded toward their horses.

Reaching there in advance of the red-men, they tore off the animals' hobbles, and springing upon the backs of the nearest, while each led a second by the bridle, they rode away with a defiant yell.

Like infuriated demons the red-skins followed; but broken-down warriors and squaws could not race with the daring white men, who had accomplished so successfully one of the most surprising feats border history has ever recorded.

"Guess we hev giv 'em the slip," said Gil, when finally the cries of the savages were only faintly heard.

"You are right, old beaver," answered Hayes, moderating the pace of his animals to that of his companion's. "I shan't forgit what ye hev done for me, not by a long sight. So giv us yer paw. I see'd Kit Carson do sum tall doin's 'mong the Pawnees onc't, but 'twarn't nowhar 'side o' yer—"

"Never mind, Paul," broke in the old mountaineer, blushing like a school-girl at his friend's rude compliment. "We hev come off all right, but I should like to know where the boys are."

"It'll be a tight tussle for 'em to escape."

"Can't we find 'em?"

"We must—hark! I thought I heard a hoss."

"So ye did! and thar kems the Golden Hand as true as I live!"

Sure enough the strange rider had suddenly come into sight, and seeing them rode that way.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Gil Rey as he approached. "Are ye the Golden Hand?"

"I am so called," he answered calmly, as he paused. "Are you a part of the prospectors who were attacked by the Apaches a little while since?"

"We are two on 'em."

"Where are the others?"

"That's jess what we would like to hev ye tell us. The last we see'd on 'em they war runnin' fer life with a couple hundred red-skins a tearing arter 'em!"

"In what direction?"

"More to the eastward."

"Have you seen the Black Riders?"

"Nary a chip. Did ye git thet gal?"

"No; the masked horde escaped with her. But I am detaining you, and I suppose you are anxious to help your friends."

"O' course. Good luck to ye, old Gold Hand," and the twain were about to turn away when he said:

"Look here; you seem honest men, I will save your friends upon one condition."

"Sho! Name it," spoken quickly.

"It is madness for you to stay in Black Pocket valley. You have more enemies than you dare think and not a single friend. I acknowledge I am your foe, but what I say I know is for your best. I will promise safety to yourselves and companions until you can get out of the valley, if you will swear that you will never come back again."

"Sho—o! Are 'em your only tarms?"

"Yes. Give me your answer at once. Every moment lost may cost a life!"

"What d'y'e say, Paul?" asked Reynolds of his comrade.

"I think we had better git. This is a pesky dangerous kentry. Ef we can't find a more wholesome lead than this, I am goin' back to Texas a-huntin' mowstangs."

"I'll fine hands with ye thar, old 'coon. So, Mister Gold Hand, if ye'll risky our friends all sliker we'll git like mountain sheep!"

"Good; it is the best thing you can do. Follow me, and we will see what we can do for your companions."

With the words the speaker headed his mustang toward the south-east, and the miners followed.

"We better keep our peepers opened," said Hayes, "fer the imp may lead us into a trap."

"D'y'es'pose he's a spook?" whispered back Gil.

"It's pesky onsartin and I don't savor much o' him."

Then in silence the little party kept on their way.

Soon, however, the yells of the red-men were borne to their ears.

"They are away from their village, and I don't believe they have captured your friends," said the Golden Hand.

"Nor I," replied Gil Rey. "But what am that?"

Suddenly they heard a cry for help, which came from no great distance.

"My stars! it's Jack, as true as I am a-talkin' beaver!" cried Paul Hayes.

Spurring their animals rapidly forward the cries were plainer heard; and in a moment they reached the spot.

Shelby Jack was in a hand-to-hand tussle with the panther.

Springing to the earth, the Golden Hand whipped out a knife and waited for his chance to strike the beast.

Rolling over and over on the ground with its victim in its clutch, the brute at last came upon the top, when with a certain blow the unknown buried his weapon in its side.

As the monster released his hold, the rescuer quickly dragged the miner away to a safe distance.

While the cougar spent its strength in its dying struggles, Gil and Paul turned to their companion.

Shelby Jack, though bruised and sore, had suffered no serious wound.

"Whar am Bill and Silver Dust?" asked Gil Reynolds.

"They were trying to run away from the savages when I fell down that cliff," replied the young Texan.

"From the sound of the Indians, I think they have cornered them," cried Golden Hand.

"Quick, if you would save them!" John Racy, or Shelby Jack, as his "chums" called him, mounted one of the spare horses, and away darted the four.

Just as True Bill and Dare found themselves surrounded by the Apaches, and felt that their last hope was gone, the shouts of their friends rung on the air.

"Hooray! thar's help fer us!" cried Bill, excitedly, and with Dare sprung from the water.

Swinging his rifle over his head rather than discharging it, the Golden Hand dashed into the midst of the savages.

Close behind swept the others. Amazed by the sudden attack, the red-skins paused.

Then they shrieked: "Golden Hand! Golden Hand!" and before a blow could be struck, fled in apparent terror.

"Ho! thar ye, Bill!" exclaimed Gil. "I reckon. An' may I be smoked ef we ain't hyar all alive an' kickin'. Wal, that cooks me!"

"You are all right if you leave at once. You remember your promise?" said the Golden Hand to Gil Rey.

"Every time. Kem, Bill, I promised this old 'coon in gold that we would git out o' Black Pocket valler quicker'n a streak o' buckshot a flyin' down a cottonwood if he'd only help git ye and Dust out o' yer scrape. He's done his part es true es gospel, and we must keep ours."

"Hev ye seen ennything o' Rock?"

"Nary a spot."

"Gil Reynolds, I don't leave the kentry till Rock is found, ef he is living; or ef he is rubbed out, till my old shooter is kivered with skulps o' the smoky-skinned coyotes es turned up his toes!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE PHANTOM HORSE.

GIL REY started in surprise. The Golden Hand looked amazed. "But this is a 'tarnal bad kentry, and the sooner we git the better, True Williams," declared the mountaineer.

"I know it, Gil; but I hev tramped too long with Rock Randel to go back on him now. 'Sides it's ag'in' my nature to desert a friend."

"Thet's ye, every time, old 'coon! Ye ain't been called True Bill these thirty years fer nothing. I'm sorry I promised the old gold-mounted chap what I did, but I thought it war fer ther best."

"Ye c-' on the square, old beaver, and ye and Big Paws can keep to yer bargain and go back to the city, while the rest o' us will take Rock's trail."

"I hate to, but I s'pose I must; so good luck to ye, old chaps."

"Have you found nothing of Rock Randel yet?" asked Golden Hand.

"Nary a spot, old 'coon."

"Don't you believe he has gone back to the settlement?"

"It wouldn't be like him," answered Silver Dust.

"I think he is either dead or gone back to Mad River. In either case you cannot help him by periling your lives here."

"Very true. But we do not know what you say, and we are anxious to relieve the uncertainty of his fate. I, for one, do not believe he has left the valley."

"Well, as you are so determined to stay, I will give you leave to remain here and continue your search for him one day, though I risk my own life in doing it. You are at liberty to go where you will until to-morrow at sunset. If you are not out of the valley then I will not promise you a moment's life. Remember, no one will be allowed to spend another night in Black Pocket hollow!"

"Sho!" ejaculated Gil Rey.

"By what right, Sir Golden Hand, do you try to dictate terms with us?" asked Dustin Dare, boldly.

Starting up his yellow mustang nervously, he replied:

"By the best right in the world. Enough for you to know that I am determined in what I say, and that I give it for your good. Look out for the Indians while you are here, and depart as I have requested and all will be well. Fail to do it and your doom is sealed!"

While speaking he turned his animal, and had scarcely uttered the last word when he dashed away.

"Strange!" muttered Shelby Jack; "but we must discover more of him."

"Look hyar," exclaimed True Bill, "'twon't do fer us to stand hyar like scart turkeys. Ef thar warn't enny chance o' the reds gobblin' us up, we oughter to be at work."

"You are right, Bill; and as you are leader, give us your plans."

"Thet's bizness. In the first place, let's git 'way from hyar afore the varmants corral us. Ef thet Golden Hand hadn't scart 'em like blazes they'd 'a' had our skulps afore this. Waghi!"

As there were but four animals, Silver Dust was forced to mount behind Williams.

In a few moments they were riding once more for the valley.

Shelby Jack had recovered his rifle after his fall into the panther's den, and thus all were armed but Dare. However, Bill's powder was all wet, and when they divided the little Gil Rey and Jack had they had only a few rounds apiece. But Dustin was given a revolver by Hayes, and they were not disconcerted.

The yells of the baffled savages were occasionally heard in the far distance:

"Let 'em ky-yi ef they want to," said Big Paws. "Guess they won't ketch us so easy ag'in."

"Yes. But what can be the object of that Golden Hand—"

"Hist!" interrupted Jack; "he is comin' back."

A horseman was surely heard, and waiting in wonder for him to appear, the sounds suddenly ceased.

"Queer, but I heard hoof-strokes es true es I live," affirmed Shelby Jack.

The others chorused an affirmative. Somewhat puzzled, they resumed their course with more caution.

They had not gone far, however, when again the same sounds were heard.

Once more they gazed anxiously around and finally drew rein as the rider seemed to approach near to them.

Still as before the noise died away and silence ominous and oppressive followed.

"Beats me all holler!" ejaculated True Bill. "But we must keep on."

Their progress was then uninterrupted for some time, and they were nearing the valley when for the third time they were brought to a standstill by the apparent approach of a horseman.

"If he don't show hisself this time I am goin' to scout round a leetle," averred True Williams.

"Thet's the talk, old 'coon," said Gil Rey; "but I reckon the creetur' is goin' to poke into sight. Hark! he is clus to thet cedar!"

The sounds indeed seemed near at hand, but before any object came into view the hoof-strokes stopped.

The miners looked from one to another in surprise.

"Come, Gil, let's hunt that animal out if it is possible. The rest o' ye keep quiet unless ye hear us call to ye, then kem like time."

Leaving their horses in the charge of the others, the two immediately hurried into the thicket ahead with cautious steps.

Advancing directly to the cedar spoken of they could find no trace of any horse or rider.

Not at all daunted they pressed still further on, and yet were unsuccessful.

Then the miners began to show their trepidation.

"Blame me if I don't believe the valler is haunted!" exclaimed Bill, under his breath.

"Them's my idee," declared his companion. "Howsomever, I reckon we'd better make the circuit o' the boys afore we return."

After making the complete circle and joining the others they had learned nothing to quiet their misapprehensions.

"I will tell you, boys," said Shelby Jack, lowering his voice to a whisper. "It is that spirit rider, Golden Hand, following us!"

Never before had his friends seen the stout-hearted Texan so nervous, and his fears made them tremble like aspens.

Silver Dust alone was self-possessed. Not at all superstitious he scouted the idea of John Racy's, and suggested that they move on.

With outspoken misgivings this last was consented to, and again they were riding slowly along.

Strange as it seemed to them they had scarcely started when once more the hoof-strokes were plainly distinguished from those made by their own animals.

"Let's go faster," cried True Bill, and spurring their horses into a gallop they sped away.

With the increase of their speed, their ponies thus making more noise with their feet, the sounds were not heard, until they finally drew rein.

Then they heard them distinct enough.

"Tain't any use!" declared Paul Hayes; "it's a ghost a-follerin' us and we might as well give up."

"Let's try once more to discover what it is," suggested Silver Dust. "Are you ready to make a reconnaissance with me, Paul?"

Expressing his willingness the big miner joined Dare, and as Bill and Gil Rey had done they made the entire circuit of the place without finding aught of the mysterious being, who had now thoroughly aroused their alarm.

"Which way now?" asked Shelby Jack.

It was light enough to see the surrounding country quite plainly, and Dustin Dare pointed toward the mountain-side, saying:

"Let's ride to the base and wait for daylight, when we must look for the lost trail of Rock."

Silently agreeing, the others followed him.

Just as they were nearing the designated place a couple of men sprung from the ground and rushed up the ascent.

It took but a glance for our miners to see that they were a part of the League in Black!

Watching them as they ran along the side of the mountain the impetuous Silver Dust exclaimed:

"Let's follow them. We may find a clew to Rock's whereabouts!"

Nothing loth his companions quickly consented.

Leaving Shelby Jack to stand guard over the animals, the others started at once in pursuit of the masked leaguers on foot, for it was too broken to follow with a horse.

Their course soon led them well up the mountain; and while hurrying swiftly along the brink of a precipitous descent, they came upon the clear white surface of what seemed the part of a huge ledge.

When midway upon this they were startled by a terrific crash, and felt the stone rushing from beneath them.

Throwing out his arms wildly, Dustin Dare was fortunate enough to grasp the limb of an overhanging tree; but his companions, with cries of horror, were hurled down the precipice, and the enormous rock went crashing down upon them.

In a moment it was all over, and as Silver Dust glanced downward he saw a deep, dark abyss yawning below!

He shouted to his companions, but no answer came.

They had been crushed to death by the falling stone!

He dared not loose his hold on the tree-branch, and tried to draw himself upward, when it snapped and he dropped rapidly downward!

CHAPTER X.

DANDY ROCK'S MARK.

"WHOO—whoop—el! I'm the roaring lion o' ther Rockers! the hard-pan o' ther Gila! Whar's the goat es shins up to ther boss king o' the South-west? Jess show him to me. Pick him out quick!" and the burly speaker, whose wild speech and antics had collected quite a crowd in front of the leading "shebang" of Mad River "City"—the "Miner's Home"—danced to and fro in frantic excitement.

"Whar am he? They sed he war hyar, and I hev kem all the way from Lone Pine to spot him! Jess trot him out!" and the giant removed his broad sombrero to wipe away the great beads of perspiration that had gathered on his brow.

The lookers-on watched him in silence. Some seemed awed by his braggartism; while others gazed upon him in wonder.

"Who is he?" one at last ventured to ask.

"Dunno, less he is Big Sandy, the bully o' the lower lead," answered another.

"Who am I?" snorted the stranger, catching the words. "Ain't I tole ye! I'm the Gila

Lion! the hard-pan o' the Rockers! Yas; I'm Big Sandy, too, right frum the Lone Pine! But whar's my game? Whar's the galoot es lifted out more coyotes at Long Meader row than enny other hoss? I want to see him! I want to put this paw on him!" and he extended the enormous member menacingly.

"He's arter Rock Randel!" exclaimed a bystander.

"Yas! that's him—The-Man-from-Texas! Whar am he?"

"Dandy Rock hes buried his buttons!"

"Wot?"

"Rock turned up his toes in Black Pocket valler!"

"Wot?"

"Rock Randel went under yesterday!"

"Wot?"

As the other ceased his explanations, the giant stared upon the crowd in apparent disappointment.

"The-Man-from-Texas wiped out!" he howled at last: "my hard-fought victoree stolen from me jess es I hed my huf on him? Hev I kem all the way from Lone Pine to be bu'sted in this way?" and tearing about wildly for a moment, he flung his sombrero spitefully against the side of the building, his countenance showing a plain case of despair.

Just as the hat touched the wall and quivered there for an instant ere it began to descend, the swift gleam of a knife darted through the air, and thrown by a skillful hand, the weapon pierced its crown, pinning it to the spot!

The throng started in surprise.

Big Sandy trembled and gazed about in amazement.

"Who did that?" he cried.

No one seemed able to answer.

"Why don't ye spoke?" the giant went on. "S'pose I'm goin' to hev my skulp-piece used like thet? Ef the goat es did thet don't show hisself less'n a minit I'll kerwallop the life right out o' his boots! Hyar!"

If the individual in question heard the demand he evidently did not care to have the "life kerwalloped out o' his boots," as no one stepped forward.

"Jess show me ennything but a sneakin' coyote!" growled the man, and advancing to the place he was in the act of wrenching his hat from its position, when another knife sped by his head, and, half severing the lobe of his left ear, struck the wall with a dull thud!

With a shriek of terror the giant bounded back, and the blood streaming from his wound, howled most vociferously.

For a time wild commotion followed.

When at last it had become more quiet, and Big Sandy had checked the flow of blood from the cut, he looked sullenly around exclaiming fiercely:

"Ef sum o' ye don't pick thet man out fer me, I'll kerwallop the hull lot o' ye! Jess p'int me a man! Ennybody'll do; only give me a chance to spread him!"

The half-cowed stranger had hardly ceased speaking when a ringing voice from the rear of the spectators, said:

"Hyar's your beaver every shoot! Jess walk up and take your meat like ye war hungry!"

Every one present recognized the tone, and to their unspeakable astonishment Dandy Rock pushed his way forward and confronted the bully.

Big Sandy rubbed his eyes and glared upon the Texan in unfeigned amazement.

"Who mought yer be?" he finally blurted out.

"Open yer peepers and see fer yerself," said Rock, nonchalantly, as he coolly folded his arms and faced the other.

"Never see'd yer picter afore. Don't know ye!" affirmed the giant.

"Tis The-Man-from-Texas!" cried a voice from the crowd.

"But ye sed he hed taken up his walkin' papers! Wot in creation can I b'lieve ye say?"

"Look hyar, old tearer," exclaimed the Texan, "ye said ye had come from Lone Pine to see me. Ef ye hev any bizness spit it out suddint, fer I'm in a pesky hurry."

"Did ye hang my hat up there, old chap?"

"Jess look at the knives, and ef ye don't find two R's cut on the handles I won't claim 'em, and ye can walk around me jess es ye are a mind to."

Pulling them from the wall Big Sandy found they were marked as Rock had declared.

"Ken ye do thet every pop, old 'coon?"

"I reckon. It's a trick I l'arnt from a pard o' mine onc't. Jess stand mulish and let me spot the end o' yer nose. I won't touch more'n half an inch."

Shifting his position uneasily, the boaster found his courage fast leaving him before the Texan's cool audacity.

"Shall I tinkle it?" continued Rock, appearing impatient for the trial. "I won't spile yer beauty."

"Git out!" blurted Big Sandy. "All I ax o' ye is to keep away from me; I ain't anything to do with ye!" and the quondam "lion o' the Rockers" shrunk away in disgraceful retreat.

As the crowd began to jeer at him, he wheeled about and yelled savagely:

"Ef thar's a goat hyar es dares to show his face I'll pan him heavy. Hyar thet?"

The mob did seem to hear, and as no one advanced to accept the challenge, quiet was soon restored.

"Where is Silver Dust? and how is it, Rock Randel, that we see you back here alive when we supposed you were dead?" one of the spectators asked.

"Wal, it am a big yarn, and I ain't the time to run it out. I'm afeerd poor Dust has gone to his last funeral. We got separated through that pesky Golden Hand. I war gobbled by the reds jess like a turkey peekin' at a dead injin. They toted me off to their wigwams, all unknown to Silver Dust, and put me through a course o' sprouts, ye bet! I hed to crawl on my head, stand on my hands and knees, and be ker-slapped in the most rantankerous way. But I stood it big, and larfed at 'em, and told 'em to go ahead, and my jeeman! they did go ahead! I war bound like a peccary and they built a warmin' fire, and war jess a-goin' to pile me up on the coals like a toad ready fer a roast, when a terrible rumpus was kicked up by a lot o' the varmints kem in with the purtiest gal I ever set my eyes on—a captive."

"Thet sort o' turned 'em frum my ugly pictur", and fer a time they danced around her like a lot o' hungry wolves over their breakfast. While they war up to their maneuvers, I twisted my paws free, and had just undid my feet, when, Jeems Stopples! ef that gal didn't knock 'em smoky-skins right and left, and mounted on a pony, leave 'em quicker'n hot water runnin' down a sand-bar!"

"Then the hull lot o' reds went arter her; but afore they got back I sloped."

"I hev been clear through their village since, and I don't think they got her. Neither could I find anything o' Dust, and I am afeerd the boy hes gone under."

"Thar are awful doings up thet way, and finding I wa'n't more'n a scared crow alone, I hev jess stalked down hyar fer help."

"Thar's my yarn. Now who is willing to go with me and help find Silver Dust and thet gal, fer I'm anxious 'bout her?"

As Rock turned from one to another of the lookers-on, none seemed willing to join him in the hazardous undertaking.

"Don't ketch me in Black Pocket valler!" ejaculated a tall, raw-boned miner.

"Nor me!" echoed others.

Finding no one ready to assist him, Randel said, firmly:

"I know it's a tough job, but ef thar ain't any man hyar who will go with me, I am going alone."

He had scarcely spoken when a clear voice cried:

"Beware, Rock Randel! Though it would save the best friend you have in the world, keep away from the Lost Mine valley! Death awaits every one there!"

CHAPTER XI.

"WORSE THAN DEATH."

A SWIFT rush of air, a dizzy, blinding sensation, and Dustin Dare felt himself going down, down, until at last he lay upon a cold, damp surface half insensible.

When he opened his eyes he saw a light spot seeming far above him, and still further away he could see a myriad of stars.

He knew that the aperture must have been hidden by the rock, and thus as he clung to the tree while the stone fell from under him, he had been precipitated into a sort of cavern by the breaking of the sapling.

A glance told that it would be impossible to scale the perpendicular wall that encompassed him.

Must he perish there? It truly seemed so.

He listened for some sound of his companions, and shouted aloud their names, but only the hollow echo of the massive surroundings gave reply.

He was lost!

Nearly frantic with the thought, he moved uneasily about.

Though the place where he had fallen was

less than ten feet in diameter, he soon found a passage that led further into the interior.

Should he follow it?

For a moment he was undecided. But, knowing it was not possible for him to escape unaided, any other way, he could lose nothing by trying it.

Stay! he would wait awhile for his friends, and then, if he heard nothing of them, he would explore the narrow pass-way.

Calling the names of his chums till he was hoarse, he waited and listened for them until long after daylight, and yet he heard nothing of them.

They had been killed by the falling ledge!

Confident that it must be so, he finally entered the gloomy passage, to slowly grope his way along.

He had not gone far before he was shrouded in Stygian darkness, so that his progress was tedious and uncertain.

Time and again he paused to turn back, but, after all, his only hope lay in the Cimmerian space beyond; and thus he kept on and on, going he knew not where, only hoping it might lead to the light of day.

At last he paused in despair.

He had stumbled and fallen for at least twenty times, and, as he staggered to his feet, his course seemed barred by a solid wall!

As he hesitated a low sound was borne to his ears.

Listening anxiously he heard it again, and this time sounding like a human voice.

Satisfied that some one must be near by, he renewed his endeavors to find a continuance of the passage.

He soon discovered that it turned an abrupt angle, and in a moment he moved along the new course.

He had not gone far before the sounds became quite audible, and he knew that several persons were not far away.

Advancing then with more caution, he soon saw to his delight the gleam of a light ahead. But knowing he was far more likely to find foes than friends, he approached with every sense on the alert for danger.

He was unarmed, and his only safety depended upon his discretion.

From the loud tones of the speakers he knew something of an exciting nature was taking place.

In a moment he came upon an apartment of considerable size; and he started in amazement at the startling tableau suddenly disclosed.

The cave-room contained at least a score of brutal-looking men, dressed in coarse garbs, while in the center, securely bound, Silver Dust saw the maiden whom the Apaches had captured and whom afterward the League in Black had rescued or pretended to.

By the dim light from the row of flickering torches stuck in the crevices of the wall, he could see that she was extremely pale, as if undergoing fearful suffering.

One of the gang had arisen to his feet, and standing over her with a knife held menacingly above her head, was saying:

"Once more, girl! I give you a chance for your life. Will you tell us who the Golden Hand is?"

Looking the hard-featured man unflinchingly in the face she replied:

"I cannot, sir."

"Ha! you lie! But I have another question. Who are the League in Black?"

The captive shook her head.

"Why don't you speak?" exclaimed the wretch, fiercely.

"Sir," she answered, defiantly, "if you have any punishment you wish to inflict, or wish to take my life, I can but yield, for I am powerless. But, helpless as I am, you cannot force me to tell that which I do not know."

"You do know," retorted the desperado. "We have seen you with the Golden Hand and you can tell us who he is, and also the mystery of the Lost Mine."

"How does it concern you? Once more I repeat that you had better set me at liberty."

"Furies take such impudence! Will you tell us who the Golden Hand is?"

"No."

Silver Dust watched the brave maiden with admiration in spite of his anxiety for her peril. Never had he seen a nobler specimen of courage.

The ruffian glared upon her in silence for a moment.

"What do you think to gain by your obstinacy?" he exclaimed at last.

"As much as I shall lose," she answered calmly.

The man fairly foamed with rage.

"You forget you have not a friend within miles. And there are none save us present who know where you are!"

"Your boasts do not frighten me."
"Bah! I will find something that shall. You shall suffer for all your stubbornness! You need not think to bluff me."

"Sir, I have friends of whom you little dream. Beware how you treat me, or this day's work shall prove a dear one to you."

As she spoke the captive drew her regal form to its full height and gazed with flashing eyes upon the trembling wretches standing around.

With an oath the leader seized her rudely by the shoulder and hissed venomously:

"I give you your last chance. Tell us the mystery of the Lost Mine, or we will force the secret from you by the harshest treatment our ingenuity can invent!"

A slight inclination of her shapely head was the only answer.

"Kill her!" cried a voice from the crowd, and the mob seemed about to spring upon her.

Dustin Dare started in dismay. How could he save her? His mind filled with a vague dread, he tried to devise some way to rescue her.

In vain.
"Back, men!" commanded the desperado chief. "I will show you how to tame her. Bring me a rope."

Silver Dust came near betraying his presence with a groan.

In an instant one of the horde brought forward a stout piece of cord.

Seizing the maiden fiercely by the wrists, the leader began to fasten the thong around her thumbs!

Dare could stand no more, but began to crawl cautiously forward.

He had resolved to reach the nearest ruffian unnoticed, if possible, and, overpowering him, get possession of his weapons and make a bold fight, hoping to escape with the prisoner by the aid of the darkness.

He had barely moved, however, when he heard a slight noise behind him, and turned just as a smart blow was dealt upon his head.

Before he could recover enough to offer any opposition, he was hurled upon the rocks and quickly bound, then dragged into the center of the place.

"Oho!" cried the chief, with surprise, "found him prowling in the passage to the rear? How in the world did he come there? Well, never mind, we will cook his venison as soon as we get through with the girl. Perhaps her sufferings will sharpen his appetite. Up with her till I tell you to stop."

Quickly placing the rope over a jut on the corner of the ledge, a few feet above their heads, the chief's willing followers slowly plied their strength to the line, till the captive was nearly lifted from her feet.

"Steady where you are, boys. Well, Miss Impudence, are you ready to tell what you know of the Lost Mine?"

Bearing her awful sufferings with remarkable fortitude, she answered firmly:

"I have nothing to tell."

"Curses upon her!" yelled the brute. "Draw her up, men, till she can't touch the rock, and then she shall hang there until she is glad to yield. Her sufferings shall be worse than death!"

CHAPTER XII.

TRAPPED.

TURNING in wonder, the spectators saw the Golden Hand riding away from them.

"Whar in the world did he cum frum?" some one asked, in amazement.

"Jeems Bung-Gum! ef he didn't riz out o' the ground, may I be used for a wipin'-stick to my shooter!" exclaimed Rock, as he watched the rider of the yellow mustang.

"I don't reckon I foller," declared a bystander.

"Let him go," muttered The-Man-from-Texas; "I hev got other meat to cook. Say, boys, whar's the chaps as goes to Black Pocket valler with me? Thar's a pile o' fun up thar!"

Notwithstanding Rock's promise of "fun," no one seemed inclined to accept.

"Rockier Mountain catamount!" ejaculated Big Sandy, "ef thar ain't another goat hyar as dares to risk his skulp up thar, here am the lion as goes every pop, Rock Randel!"

"Good!" declared Dandy Rock. "I reckon we two can do a heap."

"And hyar's a hand es 'll score his beat every time!" affirmed a broad-shouldered miner, pushing his way through the excited crowd.
"Giv us yer paw, old Texas."

As no more volunteered to go, Randel said:
"It's our lead—we three. When are ye ready to start?"

"Now," answered both.
"Thet's my hand. We must pick up sum animals and git off as soon as possible."

An hour later the trio were riding away from Mad River City at a smart canter.

"It's the last we shall see on 'em!" affirmed one of the miners in the crowd, as the little cavalcade disappeared. "Rock's getting reckless; but I kalkilate he won't be so very long!"

"It's for ye to lead," said Big Sandy, as they got fairly started on their way.

"Wal, hyar's the spot then. But I tell ye, Big Sandy and Pete Clark, we must keep our peepers wide open, fer this is the wusset kentry I ever put huff in!"

An hour and a half's sharp riding brought them within the range of the Lost Mine.

They had slackened the pace of their horses somewhat, and were riding leisurely along, when they heard a party approaching them at a moderate gait.

Reining up under the overhanging branches of a huge pine, they silently waited for the horseman to come in sight.

They did not have to wait long, though, for Rock soon caught sight of three riders.

As he saw them he moved uneasily, but apparently without fear.

"Jeems Stoppie!" he muttered, "ef it should be him!" and he started forward.

The three discovered him, and paused in amazement.

Then the foremost uttered a glad cry, and spurred the animal quickly to the spot.

"Randel Rock!"

"Do my old eyes deceive me, or is that ye, True Bill?"

"It's me every time, Rock; and I'm powerful glad ye ain't gone under yit."

"I reckon we are a pair o' glad beavers! An' hyar's Gil Rey es true es I hail from old Texas!"

When the first greeting had passed, Rock saw that his friends were in a sorry plight; and in answer to his questions was told of their adventures.

"Poor Silver Dust was all crushed to pieces by the ledge. We could see him under it jammed right into the hard earth. O' course we had to leave the body. We barely escaped with our lives. Paul hes a broken arm and leg. Gil is a'most smashed to pieces; and I am awfully bruised and hev got a broken leg."

"We waited thar and hollered fer Jack; but he didn't kem, so Gil hobbled out whar we had left him, and couldn't find nary trace o' him though he had left our bosses."

"Takin' 'em Gil got back to us and arter a hard time o' it he got us mounted, and hyar we are on our way fer the city, a lot o' sorry chaps es ye ever see'd."

"D'ye think we had better go back with ye or can ye go it alone?"

"We are all right now. But, old beaver, ye had better keep away from thet place. Go back with us."

"But Jack?"

"He's got his pony and I reckon Shelby 'll look out fer hisself."

"What do ye say, boys?" asked Rock, turning to his companions.

"I say, ef 'em chaps don't need us, to go to the risky o' Shelby Jack. Who knows but the reds hev gobbled him up?" answered Big Sandy.

"I chip with 'em!" declared Pete Clark.

"Ye sha'n't say The-Man-from-Texas went back on a friend. I am with ye on Jack's trail."

"Look hyar, old 'coon," cried True Bill, "ain't I alwus stood by 'em es stood by me?"

"Every shoot, old pard; true es a 'possum shinnin' a cottonwood!"

"Ain't I hed sum long trails and alwus kem out straight?"

"Ye hev; old beaver; and no side show!" affirmed Rock, while wondering what his friend was driving at.

"Wagh! I reckon a dog's tail don't wag fer nothin'! Now look hyar. Don't ye go any nearer Black Pocket than ye are now!"

"Ye are a slick one, old boy. I know ye hev hind sights on yer tongue, but this 'coon is half froze fer ha'r! He smells fun in ther air! He won't rest easy till he knows Jack is all square, so go on es best ye ken to Mad River. Look out for 'em hurts o' yourn, and be ready to hear sum tall yarns when this 'coon kems back. D'ye hyar?"

"Every chip! Giv' us yer paw, and don't fergit whar I hev sed. Ef ye git rubbed out, and this old man has life enough to shoulder his

shooter, he'll kiver yer grave with Apash skulps!"

"Hyar's the hand fer ye. Now git!"

Without further delay the parties separated. The one to go safely on to the settlement below; and the other—well, let us see.

Riding fearlessly forward, the three soon reached the valley, where they discovered the gigantic rock described by True Bill.

Dismounting, Rock gazed under one side that was partially lifted from the ground as it lay against the bluff that rose perpendicularly above.

"My gracious!" he cried, "Bill war right I can see a man's form under thar, and o' course it must be poor Silver Dust! Wal, he war a good boy, and I am powerful sorry. I—"

A terrific noise sounded just above, fairly making the mountain-side tremble.

"Jeeboosafat! what was that?" exclaimed Pete, in alarm.

"Dunno, 'less 'twar an 'arthquake!" averred Sandy, quickly.

"No 'arthquake 'bout that!" affirmed Rock. "Hark a moment; we may hear it ag'in."

Though they listened for some time it was not again heard.

"I move we ride up a leetle funder and see ef we can't find out what it war."

"Greed," supplemented Clark.

"Boyes!" exclaimed The-Man-from-Texas, in a fragal tone, "thet kem from the Lost Mine!"

"All the better, then," answered the giant. "I reckon this goat ain't afeered o' the critters as stop thar."

"Nor me," chimed in Pete again.

Rock was fain to put on a bold face, though, to speak the truth, in his own thoughts he didn't "savor much o' stirrin' up spooks," and joined his companions as they rode forward.

They had not gone far, however, before half a dozen men bounded from the growth and intercepted their course.

Sandy and Clark paused without a word, while Rock exclaimed, in a startled tone:

"Tis the Black Riders!" and he half-raised his rifle, when the foremost of the leaguers cried:

"Hold! Stand quiet and offer no resistance."

"Not ef this 'coon knows it," thundered The-Man-from-Texas, and quick as a flash he leveled his weapon at the speaker, and the sharp click of the lock instantly followed, but no report!

His rifle had missed as those of the Golden Hand and Silver Dust had done when pointed at the masked men!

Nothing daunted, Rock repeated the attempt, to fail again.

"Aha!" laughed the leader of the others. "You can fool in that way as much as you choose, but you are our game. You have done well to get him here, Redmond," he continued, addressing Big Sandy.

"But, why didn't you give him a cold hand, and save us the trouble?"

"I've did the best I cu'd; didn't I, Pete?"

"That ye hev, old pard," answered Clark.

"Never mind. Do you surrender, Rock Randel, without any further resistance?"

Rock was dumbfounded. He had been the victim of a shrewd scheme, but it was so unexpected and sudden that for a moment he could only stare upon his confederates, and attempted no reply.

CHAPTER XIII.

A RACE UNDERGROUND.

ONCE more the ruffian band applied their strength to the rope, and a wild, agonizing cry rent the air as the poor girl was lifted slowly upward, until her whole weight was suspended from her delicate thumbs!

Meanwhile Dustin Dare was not inactive. As every member of the fiendish horde was watching with satisfaction the inhuman treatment rendered the maiden, he wrestled with his bonds.

They had been hastily fastened, and he soon worked them loose.

Joy! one hand was free.

In an instant he had torn the other from the galling ligature; and before any one had turned from the scene in front he had cleared his feet.

"Will you tell us the secret of the Golden Hand?" cried the monster.

"Never! though you torture me with untold pain!"

"Fire—!"

Ere the desperado could end his exclamation Dustin Dare bounded forward and dealt him a blow that felled him to the earth, while he seized the desperado's knife, and then springing to the captive's side, cut the thongs that suspended her in the air.

The movement was so quickly and unexpectedly done, that it was over before any one had time to understand it.

The maiden had fallen, almost overcome by her sufferings.

Knowing that immediate action was his only hope of escape, Silver Dust raised her in his arms and started toward the exit of the cavern, just as the horde recovered from their surprise.

Springing to his feet like an enraged tiger, the leader yelled, hoarsely:

"Surround him, men! Shoot him!"

In his haste to escape, Dare had no time to select his course, but rushed for the nearest opening, bearing the helpless girl in his arms as if she were a child.

With shouts and curses the banditti hurled themselves close upon his heels.

Had Dare been armed he would have felt quite confident of escape, but with only the knife he snatched from the chieftain's belt, he had little to hope for in a last resort.

Still, he had reached the passage in advance of his foes, and plunged into the darkness that marked its way.

If the desperadoes, had not used their firearms it was only because they had not had time. As the miner was disappearing, however, they sent a volley of bullets flying around him, though he was fortunate enough to be spared.

"Follow him up, boys, and he is ours," cried the foremost; "that passage leads into the mountain and has no exit!"

Dustin Dare heard the words as well as his pursuers, and his heart sunk; and yet he could but keep on.

As they once entered the darksome way, the bandits as well as their fugitives were obliged to grope their course somewhat slowly.

"Quick! a torch!" yelled one.

By this time the maiden had so far recovered that she realized the burden she was to the other.

"I can walk, now," she said, "so please do not let me incumber you so."

"No incumbrance, I assure you," he replied, quickly, though acceding to her request. "Do you know aught of this passage?"

"No," spoken hurriedly. "I do not think 'tis the one we entered the place by when I was captured."

"I fear then we are lost!"

Meanwhile he was going forward as fast as possible.

In the blinding blackness it was only through their utmost endeavors that they could advance at all. The pathway seemed strewn with loose rocks and boulders, while the jagged wall, formed of sharp angles, ever and anon intercepted their course.

Dustin shielded as best he could his companion, but often she was forced to cry out in pain, as they, time and again, fell against the rugged rocks.

He was flattering himself that they should escape, as the footsteps of the outlaws seemed gradually dying out, when suddenly a light appeared in the distance.

They had a torch, and now would soon overtake them!

What a wild race followed.

Faster and faster the pursuers seemed to gain upon them! Whither should they turn? What could they do?

"Hunt 'em down!" cried a hoarse voice in the rear. "A hundred dollars to the man who kills the dog and brings back that girl to me!"

It was the chief who spoke and the chase was for life or death.

"Let me carry you!" exclaimed Dare, as his companion was unable to keep up with his pace.

"No, no! Let me go! You may escape alone."

"I cannot leave you!" and the brave miner more than half carrying her, still hurried on through darkness, not knowing where he was going—only hoping to escape.

Nearer and nearer came the mad horde. Still no way of escape save by rushing on—on to what?

Soon the pursuers were so close behind that Dustin Dare was forced to pause.

"It's no use to go further!" he panted, and instinctively he grasped his knife, resolved to be defiant until the last.

Then, as the desperadoes were so near that he could see their faces by the blaze of the leader's torch, he drew back into a niche in the ledge, and placing himself in front of the terrified maid, he waited for them to reach the spot in breathless silence.

"Quick! we are almost upon them!" cried the foremost, as he and his followers plunged ahead.

Dare saw by the glare of the light that there were a dozen or more of them; and he saw also that, near to him, the pathway diverged into two, while the place where he was standing after extending back a few feet made an angle, and possibly continued in a passage for some distance.

All that we have noted Silver Dust saw at a glance; and then the mad rabble had reached him.

In an instant a daring resolution had formed itself in his mind.

The party carried but one torch, and ere they had discovered him, he sprang from his concealment, when, with a well-directed blow, he dashed the brand from the man's grasp.

Extinguished by the fall the scene was instantly shrouded in a Stygian darkness.

A wild yell went up from the disconcerted gang, who had had time to barely catch the glimpse of a form darting before them to quickly disappear.

Dustin Dare regained his companion to seize her in his arms and hurry silently and as swiftly as possible along his new course.

With renewed yells their pursuers paused in a mass.

Left thus suddenly in the gloom they were momentarily bewildered.

With rage that found vent in fearful oaths the leader groped for the lost firebrand.

At last he held it in his hands and with an exultant cry called for flint and steel to relight it.

Several moments passed, however, before it was accomplished; and then they began anew the chase, to discover the different passages, when again they were at their wits' end.

During the interval Dustin Dare was improving his advantage.

Finding the pathway to continue as he had hoped, he threaded its course somewhat faster than he had been able to previously do as its surface was less uneven and its direction not so much defined with sharp turns.

"Shall we escape?" asked the girl anxiously.

"I trust so. But I shall be forced to relinquish you to your own support," and Dare was forced to acknowledge that the strain of his exertions was beginning to tell.

"I know not how to express my gratitude," she exclaimed, earnestly. "I wish you would leave me, for alone I think you would escape, while now you may not."

"Do not think I shall desert you; do not mention it again," he replied, quickly.

"May Heaven reward you if I cannot," and though he could not see the grateful look beaming from her countenance the sweet voice thrilled his very being and he seemed more than paid. Ay, already deep down in his heart the maiden had aroused the first spark of love.

His answer of tenderness, however, was checked by a different though joyous cry.

A gleam of light suddenly shone in the space ahead.

With exclamations of joy, they soon reached the opening of the underground pass-way.

"Thank God we are saved!" ejaculated Dustin, but the words had barely left his lips when he saw that they had come out upon the precipitous side of the mountain!

Twenty-five feet below lay the valley.

As they gazed downward upon a blackened waste of land, unrelieved by a single thing of vegetation, and saw the place hemmed in on every quarter by an insurmountable barrier, Dustin Dare exclaimed in surprise:

"The Lost Mine!"

Ere his companion had time to answer, their pursuers were heard close upon them!

CHAPTER XIV.

BLOWN UP.

In an instant Rock was himself. Snatching his revolvers from his belt, he stood upon the defensive, as he asked, defiantly:

"What will you have?"

"You, dead or alive!" was the quick reply.

"Then why don't you take me?"

"Then you surrender peacefully?"

"Yes; when I surrender at all!"

"Dog of a Texan, don't you see your folly? Men, capture him, and if he makes the first move I will send a—"

Before the leaguer could tell what he would send and where, Rock had sprung to one side of the clearing with the agility of a deer, and at the same moment a bullet from his pistol sent Pete Clark to the earth.

The masked leader discharged his own weapon, but the nimble miner was too quick for him.

"Quick, men! surround him!" yelled the

amazed man, and before The-Man-from-Texas had time to gain the safety of the ravine below, he found his retreat cut off.

Big Sandy, no longer disguising his enmity, was the one to meet him first.

"Hyar!" shrieked the traitor, "reckon yer game's up!" and with a hasty aim he fired his rifle at the oncoming Texan. But once more Rock was too quick for his assailants.

Bounding to the side of the giant he dashed the ruffian's firearm from his hold even as he pulled the trigger, and, thrusting his own weapon into the baffled man's face, fired.

With a shriek of pain Big Sandy bit the dust, or at least he fell there. At the same instant, too, one of the black leaguers reeled and dropped as if dead.

The shot intended for the Texan had struck, by a strange fatality, another than its expected victim!

A volley from the others went hurtling around Rock's head as he plunged into a neighboring thicket.

"Don't let him escape!" roared the chief in mask, and he had scarcely uttered the command when the remainder of his followers came rushing upon the scene.

Rock bounded into the ravine for dear life, while the infuriated league sprung after him.

Fleet of foot, the Texan's escape seemed more than probable, had not a new-comer appeared upon the scene.

Just as Rock reached the bottom the Golden Hand dashed into sight, right in front of him.

Though he had nothing to fear, as far as he knew, from the mysterious rider of the mustang, our adventurer paused in wonder at the other's sudden appearance.

"Hold! Another step and you die!" commanded the unknown, and his rifle covered the fugitive.

At the same instant the League in Black came into sight, when he uttered a cry of amazement, and unconsciously turned from Rock to face the others.

The masked band paused in equal surprise, and the three parties so antagonistic to each other stood for a brief spell motionless, speechless.

Finally the Golden Hand said:

"Why is it, League in Black, that you have so rashly unheeded my warning—that you still remain in Black Pocket valley?"

"I opine your question is not called for, Mister Golden Hand," was the defiant reply. "We are here, and here we are going to stay. Just turn that rifle muzzle of yours aside so we can recapture that dog of a Texan."

"Stand!" came the clear reply, and the speaker eyed them with the watchfulness of a tiger guarding its prey.

The masked leader muttered an oath, but remained without moving.

"Let us have the Texan and we won't molest you," he exclaimed.

"Never! Why do you make war upon him?"

"He has killed two of our friends."

"But not long since you claimed to be more than mortal. How is it, then, that he has slain two of your number?"

"Oh, they were not of our spirit league, but earthly friends."

"Bah! I have no time for such folly. League in Black, I warned you out of the valley, and by defying me you have sealed your own doom—every man of you. Hal! two of you are missing now. Where are they? Did not my knife find their life-blood? Leave the Texan to me. Though I am no friend to him, I will not see him hunted to death by you. Dare to molest him while he is in the Lost Mine lead and I will hasten your fearful doom. Away, while you can."

"We will go," cried the leader, fiercely, "but not as you wish. We are still a league of twelve, and we defy you to lessen our number."

With the defiant speech the masked man slowly slunk back from the way he had come, and his confederates followed his example.

"Rock Randel," said the Golden Hand then, "why do you still stay in the Black Pocket valley?"

"I came to find my friend."

"He is dead, is he not?"

"Yes."

"Then you have nothing to keep you here now?"

"Nary a chip."

"Will you leave and never attempt to enter the Lost Mine if I suffer you to depart in peace?"

"Jest let this 'coon huff it, and he will never ask to look on this spook place ag'in. Jeems Stopple! my skulp feels queer now."

"All right, Rock Randel, I promise not to molest you upon the condition that you leave

here forever. Remember, if you break your word to me, your death shall be the forfeit."

"I reckon this 'coon knows beaver from 'possum. So fer once he gits. Good luck, old pard, and if ye ever git into a tight scratch, jess send for Rock Randel."

Then The-Man-from-Texas turned down the ravine, and, to use his own words, "huffed it like mad."

Watching him until out of sight, the Golden Hand rode swiftly away in an opposite direction.

"Jeeman!" muttered Rock to himself, "I got out o' thet fix slick es a rattler shinnin' a greased pole! Wal, poor Silver Dust is gone under and Bill hes gone to the city, so I have nothin' to keep me up hyar. I reckon 'tain't no place for me. This spook bizness don't give a chap no show fer fun. Howsumever, I should like to show a dozen o' old Texas Rangers up this way. Guess 'em chaps in mournin' would think their funeral —"

Rock had been rapidly advancing while revolving the thoughts in his mind, and his meditations were abruptly ended by the sound of a footstep in the dense growth that lined the ravine.

Ever on the alert for danger he instantly leaped one side just as a lasso went whirling above the spot, to fall harmlessly by his side.

He had escaped the trap set for him, but before he could escape any further attack, half a dozen men sprung upon him, and in the twinkling of an eye he was borne to earth, and in spite of his mad resistance overpowered.

"At last, Man-from-Texas, you are our game," cried the exultant leader of the assailants, and Rock saw the League in Black swarming about him.

"What are you going to do with him?" queried one.

"Take him to Big Sandy, and let him fix his punishment."

"Good! I'll warrant we shall have no more to fear from him."

Then Rock was placed upon his feet, and with his hands bound behind him, was made to walk between a couple of the masked men, while the remainder of the party followed close upon their heels.

A few minutes' travel brought them to the rock-ridge which barred the entrance to the Lost Mine.

They were near the base of the mountain and where formerly existed the pass to Black Pocket.

Rock saw to his surprise that work had been commenced to blast away the huge boulder that had filled the pathway. Men were even then at work upon the task, and were evidently laboring in conjunction with the league.

He was spared all further speculation, however, by the appearance of Big Sandy, who, with his head bandaged up, came forward, smiling like a demon.

"So ye hev got 'im?"

"Yes; and leave his fate in your hands."

"Wal, that's clever! I'll fix 'im."

After a few moments' conversation with the chief of the leaguers, Sandy turned to Rock, saying:

"Look a-hyar, Cap'in Randel, on one condition we will spare your life."

"Wal, spit it out. I reckon I ain't a gone 'coon yet."

"Swear that you'll wipe out that Golden Hand and ye ar' free to go. Will ye do it?"

"No," replied Rock, tersely.

"Fool! Ye throw away yer only chance fer life! Ye shall die the awfulest death we can get fer ye. Ye shall be blown up!"

"Makes nary difference. No side show with Rock Randel. Blow me sky-high and when I kem back I'll dig yer funeral, true es I live!"

"Bah! let him die as he deserves!" cried the masked leader. "We can take care of that Golden Hand."

"Bring 'im 'long, boyees," yelled Big Sandy. "Ef we don't git sum sport out o' this may I be blowed, too!"

The rabble dragged The-Man-from-Texas forward to the spot where they had begun to clear the pass.

"Lash hands and feet, and then put 'im on top the rock. That's a charge all ready fer 'im, and ef 'tain't big enough to list 'im sky-high it won't drop 'im below the top o' the mountain!"

Many and many times had Rock faced deadly peril, but never it seemed to him was he so near death. In fact, as his captors threw him upon the top of the ledge, and prepared to fire the fuse he closed his eyes and the last spark of hope died out.

"Hooray!" yelled Big Sandy as he applied

the spark of fire to the match; "a purty ride fer ye, Rock Randel!" and the ruffian hurried to join his companions, who had sought safety further down the valley.

Slowly the fire crept along the fatal line, and the demoniac horde watched its course with fiendish satisfaction.

Poor Rock! an awful moment for him. Untold the agony he suffered.

"See!" cried Big Sandy, "'tis almost there! Ha—ha—ha, Rock Randel! reckon ye'll wish ye hed taken up—"

A sudden sh-sh-sh drowned his words, and as a flash darted from the rock, a report so deafening, so terrific that it fairly made the mountain-side tremble, awoke the valley and resounded far down the rugged country.

Then the air was literally filled with the fragments of stone hucled upward with lightning-like velocity.

Amid the clouds of rocks and dust was plainly seen the form of the doomed man, hurtled up—up, until with the debris around him he seemed but a speck in the sky!

CHAPTER XV.

INTO BLACK POCKET.

"We are lost!" exclaimed Dustin Dare's fair companion, and as they heard their pursuers fast reaching them, and saw that all further retreat was cut off by the perpendicular descent before them, it seemed truly so.

Silver Dust glanced hurriedly around for some way of escape, but none presented itself and his heart sunk. To attempt to descend to the valley would be certain death.

He realized in a breath how hopelessly they were hemmed in, and with his usual coolness prepared to sell his life as dearly as possible.

"Must those dreadful men get us?" cried the maiden in terror. "Oh, I had rather die!"

"Be brave, lady, and I trust we shall escape. There must be some way to get from here," and he crawled out of the cavern upon the very brink of the cliff.

With a shudder he glanced down into the dark depths below; and then, as he looked upward, a glad cry came from his lips.

Growing upon the side of the mountain some feet above was a tree of considerable size, and one of its branches had grown to such a length that it had bent down over the ledge and was within his reach.

He saw that near the trunk of the tree was a surface of a few feet in extent where a foothold could be easily gained.

In an instant he had formed the wild resolution of scaling the ledge to the place by the aid of the limb. True, he might be no better off then, but he fancied he saw a chance from there to descend to the valley. At least they could be no worse off and calling the maiden to him he began the perilous undertaking.

By this time the banditti were almost upon them.

Grasping the girl firmly in his right arm Dustin seized the branches in his other hand, and with her welcome aid began the steep ascent.

For a moment it seemed as if both must be precipitated into the valley, but at last after almost superhuman exertions they gained the little plateau.

"Thank Heaven for that!" exclaimed Dustin Dare, as he fell back against the tree nearly exhausted.

At the moment the desperadoes reached the exit of the cavern.

Listening in breathless silence our fugitives heard them moving to the brink of the dizzy height.

"They must have fallen off into the gorge," one said.

"More'n likely then that they were killed."

"Of course; such a fall would smash them all to bits!"

"Very well: it has saved us a little trouble. I am glad they have perished, for it wouldn't be just the thing for us to have them living, knowing what they do of our retreat. But come; let's go back. It's time we should have a call from that old Apache chief. You know he was to bring us the scalps of that League in Black."

As the words died away they heard no more of their foes; and after a few minutes they began to look for some way of escape.

"I think we have no more to fear from them," said Silver Dust, encouragingly.

"Oh, I am so glad!" she murmured. "But, how can we get away from this horrible place! Oh, I shudder as I look down from here!"

"That looks to me like a chance to descend," said Dare, pointing to a rift in the ledgy moun-

tain-side, which extended as far as they could see gradually going downward. "At least it is our only way of leaving this place."

Then slowly and with great difficulty they began their perilous descent.

Often maintaining their position by sheer strength, and anon moving quite easily along, they finally reached the bottom.

The place they had entered was, as we have already said, entirely destitute of all vegetation. Its surface was quite broken and a more dismal tract of country it would be hard to conceive of, much more to find.

The valley was perhaps a mile or more in length and nearly as wide.

"This must be the Lost Mine, as it is called," said Dustin Dare, as they gazed anxiously around.

"But, look!" exclaimed the other, "there seems no escape, for we are walled in on every hand by a precipitous cliff. And what a drear, gloomy hole!"

Silver Dust had not the courage to tell his companion that there was no escape from Black Pocket. Never had he been in a place of such utter loneliness.

"Have you sustained no injury in our perilous adventure?" he asked, somewhat anxiously.

Little wonder if he had begun to feel a more than common interest in the fair unknown, for she was a maiden of surpassing loveliness, and, better still, of gentle deportment. Ay, he had already learned to love her, and as he gazed upon her sunny features, and waving brown hair, she seemed to him the most beautiful creature he had ever met.

"No; thanks to your bravery," she replied, in her sweet tones. "But I hardly know how you will receive your reward, for I feel that any word of mine would be but a poor compensation."

"Nay, my fair friend, allow me to differ with you there. I am more than paid for all the danger I have passed, with the consciousness that I have been so favored as to aid you. And you must remember that my life was at stake as well as yours. But, Miss—Pardon me, but I fain would know your name. I trust we are to know each other better."

"Oh, thanks. My name is Real Greenwood. And now you must return the favor, Sir Stranger," she said, with an arch smile.

"Real Greenwood," repeated Silver Dust; "what a pretty name."

"But, will you please tell me yours? I do not like to be at a disadvantage."

"Pardon me; mine is Dustin Dare."

"Odd and pretty, too."

"I am glad you think so. But if you are not too tired, suppose we begin an exploration of this place. This must be Black Pocket, and, if so, I fear there is no escape from it."

"Black Pocket?" Real Greenwood asked in surprise.

"Yes," answered Dustin, in wonder. "You have heard of it before?"

"Most assuredly. My father was a part owner of the fearful place."

"What!" exclaimed Dare, with increased surprise, "you can't be the daughter of Russel Greenwood, who first came here with the Redmond brothers?"

"He is my uncle. Oh, what a fearful time that must have been."

"You are indeed right. But I trust we shall get away without trouble."

"There is but one place of exit, I have been told, but surely we can find that."

"Yes; but I have been told that that is now impassable. It has been filled with huge boulders from the mountain-side. However, we will not despair until we know the worst. And as we try to find the pass I shall be pleased to hear the story of your captivity. Surely you are the same person who sought protection from the miners camped on the stream below here last night?"

"Yes; and what a dreadful time I have had, though it don't seem much to tell."

"My home is on Mad river, away to the east of the city. Day before yesterday, while a short distance from our house, as I was riding to a friend's, I was suddenly seized and overpowered by a lot of savages."

"Without being able to warn my folks of my capture, I was carried off by the Apaches to their village. But, as if in answer to my prayers, I succeeded by a bold attempt in escaping, and, pursued by the fiends, reached you and your friends, when we were all taken prisoners."

"At first I thought those dreadful men in black were my friends; but when I plead for them to return and save you, I learned my mistake."

"Soon they were pursued by a strange horseman, who was quickly joined by others. From what I have heard, the first was the Golden Hand. We had not gone far before we were so closely pressed by him and his companions that my captors were forced to separate, and in the confused flight I was rescued, and recaptured for the third time.

"My new captors proved the banditti of the cave, and thither I was borne.

"The rest you well know, and I feel that I owe my life to you. But, how my parents must be suffering over my fate. Help me reach my home in safety, and you shall be richly paid for your trouble."

"I can ask no higher pay than to know that I am befriending you. Rest assured I will do all in my power for you."

"I do not doubt it."

Before he could reply, a fearful concussion made the mountains and valley shake as if convulsed by an earthquake, and the air was filled with a mass of matter.

Then, as they gazed in wonder upon the startling scene, they saw a huge body quivering for a moment in mid-air, where it had been thrown by a powerful agency, to suddenly shoot downward with frightful velocity, and, striking the ground a few rods distant, tear up a hill of dirt as it was buried half of its enormous size in the hard earth by the force of its fall.

Approaching the spot with wonder they saw that it was a gigantic boulder.

"But look, Mr. Dare, what is that lying upon it?" asked Real Greenwood, in greater surprise, as they saw a dark object resting on its top.

Clinging to its rugged surface was a human form!

CHAPTER XVI.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

"SEE!" exclaimed Real, in amazement, "it is a man! And he moves!"

The figure had indeed fallen from the rock.

Approaching the spot in surprise Dustin bent over the form, to cry in a startled tone:

"It is Rock Randell!"

"Is he hurt?"

"I fear he is dead," said Silver Dust, as he carefully moved the limp and senseless one away to an easier resting-place. "But how in the world did he come here in this way?" and he tried to restore the other.

It did seem a miracle, but The-Man-from-Texas really lay before them. To all appearances he was unharmed, save several bruises and scratches that to a mountaineer "war of no count ennyway."

"Will— See! he moves!"

A moment later Rock began to show signs of returning consciousness.

"Jeems Stopple! whar am I?" he cried, starting with a look of wonder. "Whew! but varn't the stars thick! I jess—hookey, Silver Dust, may I be blown like a sky-rocket ef ye don't s'prise me! No, hold my skulp ef 'tain't yer spook!" and he appeared startled.

Dustin Dare, unable to credit his own senses, gazed upon him in silence.

"Are you a spook?" asked Rock after a moment, as he rubbed his eyes and looked wildly around.

"No, Rock; I am flesh and blood. But I was never so surprised in my life. Tell me how you came here."

"Gracious alive! seems to me that I don't know myself! Let's see; it's pesky queer!"

"But are you hurt?"

"Not much I reckon, though my head feels a leetle queer and I'm stiff as a mountain sheep arter a race!" and he gained his feet, staring wildly around him. "Whar am we, ennyway?"

"In Black Pocket!"

"Black Pocket! Did that rock bring me hyar?"

"Yes; but tell me the mystery. The first we saw you were coming down from the region above lying upon that piece of rock tied hands and feet."

"Wal, I begin to tell. But I war never so completely winded before. Silver Dust, old beaver, may I be taken for a live Injun ef I ain't been blown up!"

"Blown up?"

"Yes; I reckon, and down too."

Then Rock related his thrilling adventure.

In making their charge, the League in Black had of course drilled to throw the shattered rock toward the Lost Mine; and, Rock, carried into the air on the largest piece, had remained upon it until it came down into the Black Pocket. Receiving the same momentum as the

stone, he had suffered only a severe shock when it struck; and thus he was saved from further adventures.*

"It was one chance in a thousand," ejaculated Dustin Dare, as he listened to the thrilling recital.

But we will not dwell upon the explanations that followed.

"Wal, we are in for it now," exclaimed Rock at their conclusion. "That League in Black are clearing the pass, and by to-morrow they will get in hyar. Then kems fun!"

"Are you sure there is no other exit?"

"Sartin sure."

"Then we are prisoners until our foes let us out?"

"Egactly. But, Silver Dust, you mustn't think they'll do that jess es we will want 'em to. They ain't such fools as to kem in hyar without a guard at the pass, and our chance of escape is pesky small. Howsmever, Rock Randell ain't one to whine, and he'd a pesky sight ruther be hyar than go on that cruise 'mong the stars ag'in. Jeeman! won't that be a big yarn to tell when we git back to camp?"

"If we ever do," added Dare, with a shake of the head. "But we can do no better than to make an exploration of the place."

The valley was divided by a considerable ridge of earth and rocks, extending about three-fourths of its length. This eminence and a strip of the bottom alongside were covered with the remains of a thick shrubbery that the fire had not consumed. The remainder of Black Pocket, as far as could be seen, was a blackened waste, unrelieved by a growth, except a fringe on the outer edge.

"Look there!" exclaimed Real, as they turned from the spot to explore their surroundings.

Her companions were hardly less startled, as they beheld the bleached and charred remains of human beings.

Further away were the bones of animals.

"Jess es I tole ye," said Rock. "'Tis 'em as perished here when Gasper Horn and the Apaches fired the valley."

"Oh, it must have been awful!" declared Real, with a shudder.

Half a dozen or more of the ghastly, grinning skeletons were found scattered here and there.

"Then the story of those who died here was no hoax," said Dustin Dare.

"No," affirmed Rock; "thar war a dozen o' 'em 'sides the wimmin folks and some Injuns, and they war all rubbed out. But hark! d'ye hear that?"

"Ah, they are blasting away the obstruction from the pass," declared Silver Dust, as the sharp click of a drill and the sound of the striker's hammer was heard.

"You are right. They mean bizness, old 'coon. Hal look thar!"

A loud report had suddenly broke upon the valley, and a cloud of dust and pieces of stone filled the air.

"'Twon't take 'em long to kem through at that rate," exclaimed Rock.

"What are your plans?" asked Dare.

"Wal, I reckon as we had better look round for a hiding-place. Ef 'em coyotes see us when they git in hyar, it will be our funerals. We ain't got nary weepen 'cept that knife o' yours, and nothing to eat; and all we can do is to keep shady till the varmint's c'lar the pass, and then make a strike for freedom."

"I don't know as we can do better than follow your suggestions," admitted Dustin.

"So I reckon; and 'pears to me we can find no better cache than under that bluff."

Acting under Rock's lead, Dustin Dare and Real Greenwood followed him toward the place indicated.

In reality they were all too much exhausted from the hardships and adventures they had experienced to go far.

Amid the rocks and remains of the once thick undergrowth, they found partial protection; and were fain to remain there and wait for further developments.

A few hours passed thus; the sun had disappeared behind the mountains, and the shadows were warning them of the close approach of night, when a sharp, clinking noise was borne to their ears.

It seemed to come from the earth near at hand, and sounded like the regular strokes of a pickax.

"Jeems Stopple!" exclaimed The-Man-from-Texas, as they listened to the sounds so suddenly arousing them, "'tis the spirit miners of this 'tarnal place!"

*To many this incident may seem too incredible for belief, but we are knowing to its actual occurrences. —AUTHOR.

"Nonsense, Rock! But, what are those sounds? They do seem like pickers at work."

"They ar', and 'tis as I tell ye! Spooks are—Jeeman! look thar! The Blacks are tearing the mountain all to pieces!"

The League in Black had made another blast.

Again the air was filled with splintered rocks.

Mountain and valley shook as if by an earth quake.

Quickly following the deafening report was a wild, triumphant shout.

It hardly died away when a series of unearthly yells, such as only the red-men of the West can utter, followed, prolonged into a soul-sickening shriek.

Rock started nervously, and his companions listened in breathless silence.

"The Apaches are with 'em like mad bufflers!" ejaculated the Texan. "Thet yell tells, too, that they hev done their work. It won't be long afore we shall see their pesky pictures!"

The confusion at the pass hardly lulled.

Other blasts were speedily made by the horde trying to force their way into the Lost Mine.

An hour of anxious waiting passed, when they were again startled by renewed yells from the pass.

"They'll be 'long 'fore many spells!" declared Rock. "Look sharp fer yerself then. I'm madder than a stung rattler to think I'm hyar in Black Pocket without even a toothpick to show for my independence!"

The sounds that had so surprised them had suddenly stopped, and a stillness of death hung over the place, save the cries of the mad rabble at the cut.

"Here, men, clear away that boulder in the front and our way is open to the Black Pocket," said the leader of the masked horsemen, exultantly. "At last we are within the reach of our treasure. But, Big Sandy, you are to see that your recks do not come inside the mine."

"I reckon I know," was the rather sullen response, though under his breath he muttered, "guess ye don't fool me out o' the lion's share."

The way was clear and the strange riders dashed forward.

The three saw the League in black ride boldly into the valley, and they started in wonder as they saw that their number was unbroken!

CHAPTER XVII.

FOES AND FRIENDS.

TOWARD the close of the same day that the League in Black rode into Black Pocket, two heavy, covered wagons, drawn by three mules each, might have been seen moving slowly up the valley which lay below the Lost Mine.

Besides the drivers, half a dozen coarsely-dressed men, mounted upon small, hardy horses, rode in the train, while occasionally a woman's head was seen at the wagon's front.

"Can we reach there to-night?" asked one at last of a large-framed man, who seemed to be the leader.

"I fear not. We shall soon find the way more broken. However, we will not think of stopping for the night until we find it impossible to reach there."

"Hurry up, then, boys," said the other, and the train quickened its pace for a few moments, to relapse into its former slow pace after a few minutes.

They had not progressed far, however, before the sound of hoof-strokes caused them to pause.

"It may be one of the boys coming to meet us," said the leader, as ordering a halt.

The next moment the Golden Hand came into sight.

Drawing rein in front of them with evident surprise, he exclaimed:

"In mercy's name! why did you not stay at home as I sent word to you?"

"Sent to us? what has happened?" cried the other in amazement.

"Happened! The whole Apache nation, I should judge by their numbers, has swarmed into the valley!"

"But they will not molest us?"

"I am not so sure. Long Wind is dead and they are led now by a renegade white. They are on the war-path and mean mischief!"

"How are the boys?"

"All right as far as I know. But it is impossible to enter the Pocket. And, worse still, a party of twelve men styling themselves the League in Black have blown the rock out of East Pass and by this time are in the mine!"

"Then we are booked for war!"

"Worse than that I fear! I have just barely escaped with my life and to go back to the Pocket will be like courting death!"

"But we must not desert our friends. What shall we do?"

"Send the teams back with the women and the rest of us must go to the rescue of our friends."

"Agreed. But shall we incur too much risk if we bivouac here to-night?"

"Risk? Better turn the teams as quick as possible, and don't let them rest till they are far from here!"

"Hark!" exclaimed the other, "I hear the red demons even now! By my life, I think you are right. Here, Mosco and Leydone, do you make the best speed possible for home."

"That we will," replied the twain in chorus. They were obeying the mandate, when for the second time a horseman rode up to the place, this time at a mad canter.

Started, the little party threw their firearms to their shoulders, which were quickly lowered, however, when the stranger cried:

"Hold up, friends. Don't you know me?"

"Harris Greenwood!" exclaimed one and all. "Yes. How is it I find you here?"

"We were on our way to Black Pocket."

"What? Are you aware that the valley is alive with red-skins?"

"We have just been warned of it, and are about to turn back. But, what has brought you here?"

"Have you not heard that Real has been carried off by the Apaches?"

"Real carried off a captive? When did it happen? and have you found nothing of her?"

"No. We missed her night before last and I have known no rest since in trying to find her. Oh, I fear she has been inhumanly butchered by the savages, or—I dare not contemplate the fate which she may have met!"

"I have seen her," said the Golden Hand, quickly. "She was captured by the Indians to be taken from them by a gang of men called the League in Black, when the last party were attacked by a band of outlaws that have their retreat somewhere in the mountain. I have tried my best to save her, but I have only found that Real is now in the power of the banditti."

"Better there than in the hands of the savages, but may God have mercy upon her!"

"Well may you say so," said the rider of the mustang. "But, Dimon," he added, turning to the leader of the train, "you had better turn your teams homeward as quickly as possible. It will soon be dark."

"That we will at once," and the teamsters were instructed to that effect.

As the animals were slowly headed for the south, he addressed as Dimon looked wistfully up the valley.

"How long," he muttered, "must this continue thus? Hark! I hear the red fiends now. And, by my life, I think they must be in the Pocket!"

"Ten to one!" cried the Golden Hand. "But, Dimon, hadn't you and the boys better keep with the teams till they are beyond danger? You can come back then; and Harris and I will go on toward the Lost Mine. I am anxious to know the meaning of those yells. I fear the boys are in trouble."

"I am afraid you are right. You can expect us back along before morning."

With the words the parties separated.

As the wagons were started southward on the home trail it alarmed the female occupants; and in answer to their questions they were informed of the dangers besetting a continuance of the journey to the Lost Mine.

"But, never fear," said Dimon; "we will escape without harm; and as soon as this disturbance is over, return without dread of molestation. Had we dreamed the Apaches were on the war-path we would not have ventured here now."

Thus thinking that they had avoided all peril, the party moved down the valley until compelled to stop for the darkness.

"We will camp here to-night," the leader said, "and in the morning resume the course homeward. Or at least all of you but two, who will go on to Black Pocket with me."

Forming a partial protection by placing the wagons in an angle upon one side, and tethering the animals near at hand, the emigrants partook of the food they had with them, and prepared otherwise for the darkness which had crept on apace.

"Come, boys," said the leader, "while the rest look out for affairs here, and see to the morrow's journey, we will go to the aid of those at the Lost Mine."

The two who had been delegated to accompany him, quickly mounted their horses, and

the three were soon riding toward Black Pocket.

Following the course the wagons had passed over, they made quite rapid progress for a time.

They had not ridden far, however, when again they heard yells from the direction of the Pocket.

This time they were wilder than before, and as they rode on the sounds increased in volume with a fierce ring.

"My God! we have dallied too long!" cried Dimon. "All that hue and cry isn't for nothing! Let's ride faster!"

But this last was well-nigh impossible. The country was now more broken and often their animals were forced to move at a walk.

"Head for the bottom. It is not so rugged there," said one; but the words had barely left his lips when a rifle-shot rung from the growth ahead.

Reining up impetuously, they heard others follow in rapid succession.

"Some one is in peril!" ejaculated Dimon. "Come, let's ride for the timber yonder, and see what is going on."

Riding cautiously forward they crossed the stream that was to their left, and approached diagonally the scene of the confusion.

In a moment they heard the sound of rushing bodies, and then a groan issued from the thicket.

"Quick!" cried Dimon, "that was Harris Greenwood's voice. He has been attacked by foes. Let's to his rescue."

As the three dashed out into the slight opening where the starlight made it quite bright, they saw a horseman rushing past.

In the brief moment they recognized the Golden Hand, but instead of riding his yellow mustang he was mounted upon a coal-black horse!

CHAPTER XVIII.

A BAND OF BROTHERS.

As the League in Black rode into Black Pocket they paused in front of the hiding fugitives.

"Where's the lead?" asked one. It must be toward the western side," replied the leader. "We will ride that way and see," and the strange-looking cavalcade started toward the northern end of the ridge.

"This is pesky skittish for us," ejaculated Rock. "Howsumever, it won't do fer us to show our heads yet awhile. Hear 'em varmint a-takin' on up to the pass. Reckon I should like to hev 'bout two score o' Texan boys round! Jeems Stopple! guess there'd be some tall fun!"

They watched the league until the masked riders had disappeared in the valley above.

Still the savages kept up their deafening yells.

Slowly night crept on and it began to be quite dark in the Pocket.

Soon after the Black Riders returned and halted at the mouth of the pass.

"Praps they'll go 'bout their bizness, and let us leave hyar as soon as dark," Rock observed. Their hopes began to rise as they finally saw the band ride into the pass-way and disappear.

"We'll escape to-night or my name ain't Rock Randel," exclaimed The-Man-from-Texas, as the last of the gang went out of sight.

"I hope so," were his companions' words.

Not daring to leave their covert until long after dark, and the sounds of the red-skins had died away, the time passed tediously to them.

"Kem," whispered Rock at last, "it's time we war moving. Now be pesky keerful, fer 'tis life or death. G'in me yer knife 'cause I'm more used to it than you. You keep yer club in yer hand, Silver Dust. Miss Real must keep clus behind you, while I will lead."

Moving as noiselessly as shadows in the dim starlight, the three crossed the barren waste of land, until they reached the base of the cliff that shut Black Pocket out of the world, as it were.

"Now, es we scout along in the dark hyar, jess keep yer peepers on thet opening."

Exercising the utmost caution, Rock neared the pass.

Nothing was heard now of the enemy outside, and they hoped with a reason that they had left.

Finally the cut was reached, and nothing had occurred to alarm them.

Crawling to the mouth, Rock paused and listened.

Nothing was to be seen or heard.

"They are pesky still, anyway."

"Oh, I hope they have gone!" ejaculated

Real, speaking for the first time since they had started.

"Hist!" commanded the Texan, a moment later, as Dare was about to speak, "they are there!"

"How do you know?" asked the others, in surprise, for they had discovered nothing to warn them of such an unwelcome event.

"Know? Can't ye hear their horses? And, as I live, I hear one o' their guards walking 'bout! Thar's no mistake; we are penned in!"

Now that their attention had been called to it, his companions fancied they could hear the designated sounds.

With The-Man-from-Texas it was no fancy, he well knew.

"Must we give up our hope of escape?" asked Dustin Dare, as they stood listening to the slight disturbance outside.

"Not while we hev a bit o' wind to draw," declared Rock. "See hyar, Silver Dust, I am goin' to do a leetle spyin'. D'ye jess stay hyar with Miss Real, and don't ye move 'less ye are driv' to it, while I'll crawl 'long the pass and see what thar is at t'other end. Mind ye don't git oneasy if I don't kem back afore daylight, 'less ye hear me gi'n my whistle, when ye may know I hev got gobbled up, and ye had better put for our hiding-place like mad. Arter thet do what ye think is best. But I don't 'tend to let 'em dig my funeral. Sharp's the word, and don't git skeery. Hyar I go."

With this final declaration, Rock entered the pass-way, and began to crawl slowly forward. Dustin and Real watched him anxiously until his form faded from sight in the darkness.

Then time wore slowly on and they heard nothing from him.

"Where can he be?" asked Real, at last, unable to bear the suspense longer without speaking.

"He has met with no mishap or he would have warned us," replied Silver Dust. "Try and keep up hope a little longer. He will doubtless soon return."

Again they relapsed into silence, and still Rock did not return.

Fully an hour had passed and Dare was beginning to grow nervous as well as his companion.

"He must come back soon," he said.

"What if he don't?"

"Then we must look out for ourselves. Hark! I thought I heard a cry from the savages."

The words had scarcely left his lips when a wild, terrifying shriek awoke the stillness of the night.

Dustin and Real started with dread forebodings.

Before either could speak a sharp whistle rung on the air, coming from the same way as the war-whoop.

"Rock has fallen among the savages!" exclaimed Silver Dust, in dismay.

Real Greenwood was for the moment the more self-possessed of the two, but she attempted no reply.

"We had better follow Rock's advice," Dare went on to say after an instant. "We can do him no good, though I pray he may escape. Let's return to our hiding-place. Mercy! I should think the whole Apache nation was in Black Pocket valley."

The foes had indeed raised such a Babel of sounds that the uproar was almost deafening. Mingling with the cries, too, was the report of fire-arms.

To Real, though used to border life, the confusion was terrible, and she could not help shuddering as she shrunk against her companion.

Leading her gently forward with words of encouragement, Dustin started toward the spot where they had found their covert before.

He had scarcely turned, however, when he paused in dismay.

Coming up from the center of the Pocket, he saw a body of men approaching him!

They seemed to discover him at the same moment, for they instantly threw their rifles to their shoulders.

Real came near, uttering a cry of terror.

Seeing that it was impossible to escape, Silver Dust was forced to meet them, though his heart sunk within him.

"Don't fire, boys!" they heard the foremost say. "One of them is a woman, and they may be friends."

Something in the man's tone seemed not altogether that of a ruffian's, and Dustin Dare was emboldened to say:

"We are friends to the peaceful."

"Good! Who are you?" the leader asked, as he came nearer.

"We are prisoners in this place. We had a

friend, Rock Randel, who left us a little while ago to scout out our enemy, but by the cries we fear he has been captured."

By this time the men had reached them, and they saw that there were four of them, all tall, powerful miners, as their garbs indicated the last.

"We have heard of Rock Randel, and are glad to meet friends of his, for his friends are our friends. But I fear something of more than common moment has brought a lady here. Ah! pardon me; but are you not Harris Greenwood's daughter?"

"I am Real Greenwood," replied our heroine. "And you are Leon Redmond?"

"You are right, fair lady; and these are three of my brothers."

"Glad are we to meet you, too, Miss Greenwood, though we wish it was under pleasanter circumstances," greeted the others.

"Excuse me," cried Leon, "but if I mistake not we have work on hand. Have not the Black Riders cleared the pass?" he asked of Dave.

"Yes."

"Then they are likely to enter the Pocket at any instant."

"Ha! they are coming now!" exclaimed one of the others.

"Forward, then, quick! If they come within the cliff we are lost!"

CHAPTER XIX.

LEAGUER NO. 10.

As the three miners dashed across the opening, and the Golden Hand disappeared to the right, another horseman came into sight from above.

At first glance they saw that it was Harris Greenwood, and he was hotly pursued.

"Quick! for the bottom!" he cried, as he saw the party. "The red-skins are coming!"

Then a wild yell rung from the growth, and a horde of savages sprung forward.

Dimon and his companions followed the lead of Greenwood, and in an instant all had disappeared in the ravine below.

With increased yells, the Apaches followed.

For a few moments wild excitement raged. Mounted upon their sure-footed horses, while the Indians were afoot, the whites soon escaped without a scratch.

"A narrow escape!" exclaimed Harris Greenwood, as they at last paused for a brief respite. "Golden Hand and I ran squarely into an ambush, and if we didn't come near going under may I be shot! I fear he has not escaped as well as we have. The reds dismounted him. But, hark! I hear them below here! Ten to one they will discover the teams, and then our friends are lost. We must ride down and see to their safety."

Spurring their horses quickly forward, they started down the valley.

Dashing through a line of shrubbery that skirted the bank of the stream, they came into the bottom, where they were enabled to make better speed.

Harris Greenwood was in advance, and the others close behind him, when a rush was suddenly heard in the growth.

Then, ere they could understand the movement, a party of horsemen bounded out of their concealment, and surrounding the four miners, swept upon them with such power that almost in the twinkling of an eye two of them were hurled from their saddles, while the others were covered with half a dozen rifles!

"Hold, or you die!" thundered a hoarse voice. "Bind them, boys, quick, for your lives!"

To their amazement the discomfited miners beheld the League in Black.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the leader, as a part of his followers secured the fallen men, while the remainder held Greenwood and Dimon inactive before their weapons. "Your game is up! We have run you to the end of your race!"

Harris Greenwood had no reply to offer. For once in his life he had been caught napping. Knowing the folly of giving resistance, he could only allow himself to be bound like a brute as soon as his fallen friends had been secured in a similar manner.

He saw but ten of the league, and felt that the others were not around.

Perhaps the missing ones had been killed.

"What shall we do with them?" asked one, when the prisoners had been rendered helpless.

"Oh, we will hand them over to the savages. It will save us trouble. But where are Nos. 9 and 10?" and the chief seemed nervous.

"No. 9 was with us when we started, but I haven't seen 10 since we were at the pass," replied one of the leaguers.

"We will wait a few minutes, they may come up." Relapsing into silence, the party remained several minutes in anxious waiting.

While thus, each one busy with his own thoughts, shrill cries were borne to their ears, and then succeeded the crash of firearms.

The masked riders started, and gazed down the valley, from whence the sounds had come.

Harris Greenwood and his friends turned pale with dread misapprehensions.

"Good!" exclaimed the chief of the leaguers, "the reds have attacked your friends, and they will make it hot for them. Guess you will think after a time that you had better kept out of Black Pocket valley, eh?"

"Sir," cried Dimon, speaking for the first time,

"what reason have you for this treatment? We have no war with you, and it will be best for you to let us go peacefully on our way."

"Bah!" yelled the other, "you don't know what you are saying, Dimon Redmond!"

Wild and higher rung the sounds from below.

Harris Greenwood and his companions fairly groaned aloud.

Dimon Redmond aroused by the unknown's words struggled fiercely with his bonds, the movements causing his horse to leap forward, and for an instant it seemed that he would escape.

"Stop the brute!" cried the leader. "Death to the one who lets either of them escape."

A couple of the leaguers had succeeded in checking Redmond's horse, when a rider was heard coming through the growth, and approaching them.

"Look sharp!" exclaimed No. 1. "It may be a foe!"

In a moment the horseman had come boldly into sight. A single glance showed that he was one of the League in Black.

"Ho! where have you dallied?" greeted the chief. "Had to run the gantlet of five hundred enemies!" blurted out the other.

"Enemies? Where did you see them?"

"Right at the foot of the mountains. But you needn't be alarmed, I wiped him out!"

"Him? You said there were five hundred! Explain yourself."

"Don't the Golden Hand count five hundred? It was him I met and rubbed out."

"Have you killed the Golden Hand?"

"If I hain't 'twan't my fault. You needn't fear him any more."

"Good upon your head, No. 10. Now we will take our prisoners to the camp, and give 'em over to the reds."

"Sho! So you have caught these chaps? Wal, that's clever," and the speaker became one of the guard over the captives as they started up the valley.

Following their leader the masked riders rode slowly up the hollow.

All the while the wild confusion was raging further down the gorge.

As they rode through the growth it was quite dark, and the Leaguer No. 10 pressed close to the side of Dimon Redmond.

Then the latter heard him whisper: "I am going to cut your bonds. Ride for your life when I do!"

Redmond came near giving an exclamation of surprise.

Still the horsemen moved slowly on, often obliged to separate somewhat as the growth became thicker.

Where the forest was the darkest, Dimon Redmond felt the thongs cut from his hands, and then he was free!

"Now!" hissed the deliverer.

"Quick as a flash Redmond seized the bridle-rein that had been hanging loosely on the horse's neck, and striking the animal furiously with his rowels, wheeled it and rode madly away.

"Good mercy!" cried Leaguer No. 10, the first to be alarmed apparently, "there he goes! Quick! or you will lose him!"

In an instant yells of amazement filled the air, and turning their horses abruptly the horde plunged after the fleeing miner. All save three, who staid behind to guard the remaining captives.

"Look out for them!" yelled the leader. "Here, men, quick, catch the dog!"

Dimon Redmond was too old a hand to be easily caught. Gaining at the outset a good advantage, he almost instantly left his pursuers far behind, and at last they were fain to return to their companions, to find a still more startling discovery.

CHAPTER XX.

THE VALLEY IN FLAMES!

LEON REDMOND and his brothers sprung quickly forward to the pass, closely followed by Dustin and Real.

They could hear their foes plainly, and a portion of them had seemed to enter the defile.

"Let them come," said the older Redmond, grimly. "Are you armed, Mr. Dare?"

Receiving a negative answer he went on: "Well, you stand back with Miss Greenwood, and the rest of us will give the rascals a dose of lead."

Throwing themselves prostrate upon the earth behind boulders that lay near the mouth of the pass-way the four waited patiently for the enemy to come in sight.

"Don't fire till you are sure of your man," whispered the leader.

When a few minutes' anxious waiting had passed, the miners saw several dark forms coming slowly along the way.

"There they come!" hissed Leon. "Be ready to fire when I give the word."

Apparently unconscious of the fearful trap into which they were going, the party approached the watchers.

Finally they were near enough to see that they were savages.

"Fire!"

As the word rung out clear and distinct, the reports of the miners' rifles succeeded with fearful effect.

In an instant a wild panic raged in the cut.

Completely surprised, those of the red-skins who escaped the fire, too terrified to retreat for the moment, howled in startling tones their fear, dancing to and fro like so many fiends let loose from the lower regions.

"Reload as quick as possible for another dose," said Leon Redmond, and his brothers were not slow to obey.

The savages, however, were not to be caught again. Ere the whites had recharged their weapons

they turned and fled, leaving four of their number dead.

Meanwhile the uproar among the Indians was increasing.

"We have got to look sharp now for they are crazy for blood," declared Roy Redmond.

"Yes; and for fear they may attack us, we had better make a fortification of these rocks," said Lewis.

The others agreeing with him they began their work at once.

Rolling in some of the largest at the bottom, they then piled the smaller boulders upon the top, till a strong wall was built across the mouth of the pass. When they had filled the crevices with bits of pieces of stones, save four apertures that they had left to fire from, they were entirely shielded from the bullets of the Apaches.

"I think we can hold them a siege here," was the comment of Hart Redmond, as they watched for their foes, while listening to their unearthly outcry.

"But what shall we do for food?" asked Silver Dust, anxiously.

"Never fear that we are destined to death; at least for a considerable time," answered Leon Redmond, with a laugh. "We have plenty of food at our camp on the other side of the ridge."

"Pardon me, but I hardly understand you," said Dustin. "You speak of a camp in Black Pocket. Can it be possible you have been stopping in this place?"

"Quite possible," replied the other, with a smile. "We have been in the Lost Mine, as it is called, a long time."

"But—but, excuse me; I did not think any had ever been here since the death of those who came here a year ago. At least, I have been told so."

"Without doubt; notwithstanding, we have been here ever since the fire."

"Are you those who were said to have perished here?"

"The same; we escaped by another exit out of the Pocket, and have lived to come back here to work the mine ever since, though we have been careful to keep it from the world. We have never been molested until now. As a last resort we can seek our way from this place by the other passage I spoke of, though that will hardly be less dangerous, as I think the valley below here is overrun with the red-skins. Hark! their cries are louder than ever!"

"And there they come!" exclaimed Roy.

"Ready, then, and don't waste a shot."

Crouching under the sides or crawling along the bottom, the dark forms of the savages were seen cautiously nearing them.

There seemed to be a dozen of them, but more our adventurers could not distinguish.

Finally they paused as if reconnoitering the situation.

The mad confusion had somewhat abated outside, and within the Pocket all was all of a deathlike stillness. A few moments of silence passed within the defile; and then a sharp thud was heard against the breastwork shielding the miners.

This was quickly repeated, when it was found that the red-skins were using their long bows.

"Shoot away, old chaps," muttered Leon Redmond, "we will make it lively for you in a few moments."

Finding that no attention was given to their firing the assailants grew bolder and began to advance. Then the miners' rifles again belched forth their fiery contents with deadly effect.

Repulsed, terrified the second time, the Indians made no attempt to make a stand.

Before the whites could reload their weapons they had fled from sight.

"So far, so good," said Leon Redmond triumphantly. "Reckon they'll get enough of that; but it won't do for us to be caught napping."

Relapsing into silence the little party waited anxiously for the next move from the red-skins.

Five, ten minutes passed.

"Hist! there they come!"

A light had suddenly appeared in the defile, and was rapidly approaching.

"What's up now?" asked Dustin Dare in wonder.

"Some new trick—Ha! they want to talk; they have a white flag."

This last was now plainly seen in the hands of the leader, as he boldly advanced.

"'Tis a white man!" exclaimed Roy.

Sure enough it was big Sandy!

Waving the torch in one hand and the truce in the other, the renegade continued to approach, until Leon Redmond cried sternly:

"Hold! Be you friend or foe, stand where you are."

Stopping abruptly the giant tried to penetrate the semi-darkness ahead, without offering to speak.

"What will you have?" demanded the miner.

"I want to know who you are, and why you treat defenseless men in the way you have!"

"As to who we are it does not matter. No one fears to me ye are party independent. No one wanted to trouble ye, but as ye hev begun the war the reds want satisfaction. Will you surrender, or shall we proceed to wipe you out?"

"Nary a surrender! Proceed with the funeral!" was the taunting reply.

"I should like to know who you are!"

"We are the Redmond brothers."

"Bah! you lie! They are dead."

Leon Redmond moved uneasily.

"Beware!" he cried. "If you have no more to say, withdraw at once."

"Wait! Is Rock Randel with you?"

"No."

"Then the game is ours," and he turned back muttering: "I knowed that Texan was wiped out!"

After the departure of Big Sandy nothing was heard from the savages for some time.

"Wonder what they are studying up? But Rock hasn't fallen into their hands or he wouldn't have spoken as he did."

"He may have escaped," said Dustin, "though it don't seem possible."

"Look there!" cried Lewis Redmond, "what is that light down the valley?"

A lurid glare had suddenly sprung up to the south, and was sweeping far right and left.

"Merciful Heaven! the Indians have fired the valley!"

"Yes; and they are scaling the cliff!" cried Roy Redmond, with increased alarm.

The flames were leaping high into the air, lighting up the surrounding country with dazzling brilliancy. Disclosed plainly in the vivid light was seen the forms of a score of savages rushing along the top of the rock-ridge that isolated Black Pocket.

By some means they had ascended the barrier, and had it not been for the fire would doubtless have succeeded in surprising the besieged miners.

Finding that they were discovered the red-skins uttered a wild war-whoop just as the whites sent a ringing volley of bullets among them.

CHAPTER XXI.

ROCK TO THE RESCUE.

Those encamped at the wagons passed an anxious time after the departure of Dimond Redmond and his companions.

Hark Redmond was considered the leader of the party, and his first movement was to see that all was in readiness to meet an attack from the savages, for he was not sanguine enough to think they should escape one.

Placing the wagons in form of the letter V, he then ordered that the men should bring up what fallen trees they could find in the vicinity, and planting them outside the vehicles, quite a strong barricade was speedily made.

"Now we can only watch and wait," said Hark, as with the others he seated himself behind the shelter.

"Hark!" exclaimed a companion, "I hear them up the valley! They are coming!"

At this moment they heard the outcry above. The frightened women began to draw closer together, as they listened to the appalling sounds.

"Keep up courage," said Redmond, "they may not discover us. If they do, we can stand quite a siege here. You have corralled the animals as best you can?" he asked of the others.

"Yes," responded one. "But hear the firing! I fear Dimond and the others have run into an ambush."

"It would seem like it. Hal! the cries are nearer! The red-skins are coming this way! See that your powder is dry, boys."

The horde was approaching, and with bated breath the whites listened, noting their dusky foes' progress by their unearthly tumult.

Nearer and nearer came the warning of danger, gradually decreasing in volume.

The miners had extinguished their camp-fire, knowing that it would betray them to the enemy.

"Have they stopped?" asked one, anxiously, as the cries entirely ceased.

"I think so. Be ready, boys; the crisis is coming!"

Hark Redmond had barely uttered the words, when a yell more terrible than any before startled them.

"Here they come!"

A furious crash succeeded, and the yelling demons hurled their forces upon them.

As they burst through the line of timber, the rifles of the miners pealed forth their deadly warning, with such fearful result that the Indians were forced to flight.

"Hold them there, boys, and the victory is ours!" exclaimed Hark Redmond.

With fierce yells of defiance, the baffled savages drew back into the darkness of the forest.

At this moment the besieged miners discovered a slight fire in the brushwood just to their right.

How the flames caught it was never known, but, beyond doubt, they started from a spark of one of their rifles. Be it as it would, they increased so rapidly that when the red-skins prepared a renewal of the fight the blaze illumined the timber for some distance.

Without seeming to heed it, however, the Indians began to creep cautiously forward. Their defeat before had learned them a bitter lesson.

"Hist! they are coming like painters!" warned Hark. "Look sharp, and fire when I give the word."

Then for a few moments the silence was unbroken, save by the crackling of the fire.

A strong wind was spreading the flames right and left, and rapidly fanning the tiny sparks into a conflagration.

Crawling along in the shrubbery, the savages were fast approaching their intended victims, and seemed certain of reaching a position that would make the struggle hand-to-hand.

At this critical instant when the whites seemed on the eve of total destruction, the fire reached a larger pile of dry brushwood, and streaming far up into the air disclosed the crouching forms of the red foes plainly to view.

Seeing that they were discovered, the horde leaped to their feet, and hurled themselves en masse upon the miners.

Quickly emptying their rifles, our hardy band was forced to meet them face to face, hand to hand, to sell their lives as dearly as possible.

Overwhelming them in numbers, and fighting like fiends incarnate, the red assailants must have gained a speedy victory.

The helpless women shouted in terror.

The foes answered with demoniac yells, and tore them from the wagons!

In the midst of the wild scene a horseman dashed up to the spot.

Plainly seen in the light of the conflagration it was the Golden Hand!

Giving expression to a ringing cry he plunged his horse in among the Apaches.

As they beheld him, they paused in their bloody work, giving utterance to his name.

Awed by the bold durance of the mysterious rider, and frightened by the peril of the fire, the Indians relinquished the fight. A moment later they were gone.

"Thank God, we are saved!" murmured Hark Redmond, and the others echoed his words.

A new danger was upon them, however, from the fire. But the wind was blowing smartly from the south, and soon swept the mighty conflagration up the valley.

Safe at last the party watched it sweeping furiously on.

"It has done us a good turn," said the Golden Hand, "but may God have mercy on our friends. They are lost!"

Meanwhile, when Rock left Dustin Dare and Real Greenwood he crept slowly along the pass until he had reached the outer end, and nothing had occurred to alarm him.

Near the entrance to the place he could see the savages lying around their camp-fire, some apparently asleep, while others were smoking or lounging idly about.

"Jesse as I thought," he muttered to himself. "Rock! I shouldn't hev to stir round much to kick up some genuine fun!"

Seeing a boulder ahead where he could get a better view of his foes and still remain unseen, he began to crawl slowly toward it.

He had spent much time in his progress thus far, but your true plainsman or mountaineer has an unfailing supply of patience, and, had it been necessary, Rock would have devoted an hour to the purpose of gaining that desired spot with as good grace as he did the fifteen minutes it took him.

"Dang my buttons!" he said to himself, "if I don't believe I could stop that guard Jesse's slick as sliding down hill."

The Indians had watchers outside the pass, but, without dreaming of danger, they exercised but little vigilance.

Rock passed several minutes watching them, undecided what course to pursue.

Alone he could easily escape, but—

In the midst of speculation he was aroused by hearing some one approaching him.

He turned and saw that one of the League in Black had arisen and was coming toward him.

Evidently the man was unconscious of his presence, as he approached him carelessly enough.

Rock was in a dilemma.

Finding he could not escape, he prepared to overpower the leaguer as soon as he should come nearer.

Lying perfectly motionless, the Texan watched the other closely, until he was almost upon him; and then he sprang up to seize him in his strong grasp and bear him to the earth before the victim could cry out.

A short struggle and The-Man-from-Texas had rid the world of one more desperado; and in an instant he was carrying into effect a daring project.

Quickly divesting himself of his outer garments, he hastily donned those of the other, even to his mask.

At this juncture the Indians were startled by something in front, and fearing that a discovery was coming Rock gave his alarm, and sprang forward to join in the rabble.

He was in season to see the Black Riders leave the savages, and resolved to carry out his role he followed as soon as he could find the horse of the dead man.

We know how he effected the escape of Harris Greenwood, and the moment he was left with the two leaguers over the remaining pursuers, he threw himself upon them so fiercely that, when the others returned he was master of the situation, and had freed his friends.

Before they could recover enough to understand what had taken place, the three sent as many of the masked men to the earth.

Harris Greenwood came dashing back at the sound of the shots, and terrified, the remnant of the League in Black turned to flee.

Three of them escaped.

"Hooray, boys!" cried the now unmasked Rock Randel, "war'n't that fun?"

"May Heaven reward you, Rock Randel," said Greenwood, grasping his hand. "You are the noblest man in this country!"

"Wal, I reckon I hev kem to the rescue at last. But I want to know who these chaps in mourning are," when the masks were torn away from the faces of the dead leaguers.

As had been supposed the leader was Gasper Horn.

Only one other was recognized, and he was Shelby Jack!

"Wal, who'd 'a' thought it?" ejaculated the Texan. Not long were they allowed to speculate. An instant later they saw the fearful conflagration sweeping up the valley.

Stretching from side to side—mountain to mountain—there was no escaping.

Roaring, leaping, rushing far up into the night air, and destroying everything in its course, the flames came sweeping swiftly onward!

"We are a-goner now!" cried Rock, as they gazed upon the invincible foe that knows no mercy.

CHAPTER XXII.

THROUGH THE FIRE.

"Quick! Follow me and I'll show you a way to escape," cried one of the miners, and he headed his horse up the valley toward the Lost Mine.

Rock and the others instantly followed.

Plunging their animals through the tangled growth the four rode wildly forward, with the flames gaining upon them at every gust of the strong wind.

Rock had not forgotten his friends, but in the mad fight he had presence of mind enough to know that they were safe from the conflagration.

Suddenly the leader of the fugitives reined up.

"We are to the entrance to Black Pocket," he said, hurriedly, and drove his horse through the thick shrubbery, to ride into a considerable stream.

Following it for a few rods they suddenly came upon an opening in the bluff, and a little later they were inside the Pocket.

"This entrance has never been discovered," said the leader; "and it was by this way that we all escaped at the time of the fire, a year ago, when it was supposed that we had perished. But we have no more to fear from the flames. I hope our friends below with the teams have escaped."

"The wind is favorable for them. We will trust that they were," said Harris Greenwood, hopefully.

"I wonder where the boys are? We left four Redmond brothers here when we went down to meet the train."

"Look hyar," exclaimed Rock, "couldn't we get round to the pass from hyar? I left a couple o' friends that who I'm pecky skittish about. They war Silver Dust and a gal called Real Greenwood."

"Real Greenwood! My daughter!" cried Harris Greenwood. "Is she alive and unhurt?"

"She war less'n two hours ago."

"Then let's go to them at once," exclaimed the anxious father.

"We can, and look for the boys as we go along."

"With nothing to impede their course now, they rode hurriedly forward, soon reaching a few rude camps and evidence of mining."

"This where we have been working the claim," said the foremost in explanation. "You see we have worked here most of the time, for a year."

Seeing nothing of their companions they kept on around the ridge, to finally reach the other side and in hearing of the fight going on at the pass.

"Our friends are in danger!" and they spurred forward to mingle in the strife.

Their arrival was opportune.

Dustin Dare and the four Redmonds were in a tight place, but re-enforcements quickly turned the tide of battle, and the savages sought safety in flight, to fall before the flames.

With nothing to fear from it, the miners turned to watch the conflagration, as it devastated the valley.

The reunion of the father and daughter was joyous.

In fact all had reason to rejoice over their escape from the many perils which had encompassed them.

"God be praised that I find you again unharmed," murmured Harris Greenwood, as he folded Real to his breast.

"I, too, am happy, dear papa. But I owe my life to my dear friend here, Mr. Dare."

The remainder of the time till daylight was devoted to story-telling and congratulations.

The fire raged for about an hour, and when the party left Black Pocket it had long since died away.

The savages had probably all perished in the flames. At least, they were no longer dreaded.

The cavalcade rode down the valley to find their friends and relatives around the wagons, who hailed them as from the grave.

"Though I think there is nothing more to fear from our foes, we will return with the teams to the settlement," said the Golden Hand, now addressed as Russel Greenwood, who was really a brother of Harris.

Upon consultation, however, it was decided that a part of them should go on with the teams and the rest return to the mine and look after things there.

Leon Redmond led one half the number back to the Pocket, while Russel Greenwood guarded the others and the women toward their home.

After being driven from Black Pocket the year before Leon Redmond had returned and commenced working the mine with his brothers and companions.

Russel Greenwood had acted the part of the Golden Hand to carry provisions to his friends, and also see that they were not surprised by foes.

Gasper Horn had formed the League in Black, hoping to gain possession of the Lost Mine.

As often as one of their number had been killed he had filled the vacancy with a new man.

The failure of the rifles used by their foes was due to the fact that the traitor Shelby Jack had plugged the nipple of each rifle.

The rightful owners of the Pocket mined the ore there without molestation until they had satisfied their most greedy cravings for the precious treasure.

Rock and Silver Dust received a good share, too.

Dustin was more happy, however, over the higher prize that fell to him—the Real gem that became his.

With the beautiful Real for his wife he considered himself the happiest man in the South-west! Possessing her unbounded love, what more could he ask for in this life?

True Bill, Gil Rey and Paul Hayes soon recovered from their wounds and lived many years to hear the thrilling story their companion, Rock Randel—Dandy Rock—had to tell of the trail into the Black Pocket.

Rock, noble Rock, unlettered but generous almost to a fault, we will bid him, not adieu, but *au revoir*.

THE END.

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